

Explicit

No Archive Warnings Apply

M/M

ZEROBASEONE | ZB1 (Korea Band)

Boys Planet (Korea TV)

Sung Hanbin/Zhang Hao

Sung Hanbin

Zhang Hao (ZEROBASEONE)

Kim Jiwoong (ZEROBASEONE)

Kim Taerae (ZEROBASEONE)

Seok Matthew

Kim Gyuvin

Shen Quanrui | Ricky

Yoo Seungeon

Han Yujin (ZEROBASEONE)

Chen Kuanjui

Alternate Universe - Idols

as in they're still idols but not as zb1 i mean the summary explains

Fake/Pretend Relationship

that's never really fake as usual

PR relationship of sorts

Eventual Smut

Slow Burn

Be patient

Alcohol

Smut

English

Clickbait (but, honestly, it looked believable!)

whatifidbeenthatauthor

Summary:

The idea was simple: both groups were struggling, so a joint PR operation looked like the best solution. Mutually beneficial, they would all gain something from it. More attention, more fame, more success. But, what if they both fell for real?

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Hao and Hanbin are idols from different groups. In a desperate attempt to avoid disbandment their managers push them into a PR relationship. Fans like shipping, right? Yeah. It should be simple, it should just be work. It's not.

Notes:

Hi!!

I have a few things to say right before we dig in (sorry). First of all, a bit of a foreword about how characters are used and why. I've thought a lot about how to split our dear ZB1 in two groups, and I'd come up with what you'll read here. Alas, for the plot (given I didn't change anyone's ages) it made for a very blatant case of child labor to have our Yujin in one of the groups. So, you'll have to trust me on this, he'll be here, later on. Just. Please, trust me.

Then, this is the first time in my ENTIRE life that i start posting a work when i'm not done with it, not only, i'm just halfway through the next chapter. The chapters will be SUPER long because they're not really intended as chapters but like "acts" of this story? My brain is messy. However. I WILL update. It's just that I've been working on this for months and I wanted to be sharing this already and my life is a bit busy rn and you don't care so: when will I update? We'll see! Huh. Not stressful at all. (Please don't ask me this, I will cry. Don't comment or tweet me with "hey sweet girl when will you update?" because I will have an existential crisis!)

Have fun reading!!

(See the end of the work for [more notes \(#work_endnotes\)](#).)

Chapter 1 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/50821996/chapters/128387665>): Part One

“What?” Hao knew he sounded rude, and that there were people way older and way more powerful than him sitting right opposite him, but it was outrageous. The thing they were suggesting was insane, half-offensive and completely guaranteed to ruin everyone’s life.

“I know we’re asking for a sacrifice,” Mr. Lee — CEO of his company, a man he’d seen in person maybe only twice before — was wearing a contrite expression, as if he was well aware that he was asking the impossible. “But the sales have to go up, and we’ve tried everything, and nothing seems to work.”

“The industry is saturated,” Dr. Ji — CEO of the *other* company, the one who would join in on this madness — chimed in. She looked like a nice woman, and the Doctor title attached to her name made her sound like she knew what she was doing. Except, Hao still thought it was an insane request. It was too crazy to even speak it out loud, let alone suggest it in a formal meeting. “And we think both your groups deserve a spot in the limelight, but our production alone can only go so far. We don’t have the economic means other companies have.” Yes, Hao knew this. And he knew his own group was risking disbandment, and he worried about it everyday. He worried about his members, he worried about all the work they’d put in to achieve their dreams of debuting and how it looked like debuting wasn’t going to be enough. And, truly, he would do anything to make them get the spotlight. Because they *were* good. They were honestly better than some popular groups, even, but they just didn’t have the same money. It sucked.

“We know it’s not a conventional method to get publicity,” Mr. Lee and his understatement of a lifetime. “So we’re asking the two of you if you’d agree to it.”

The two of them. Him, Zhang Hao, twenty-three year old, a Chinese idol transplanted to Korea, leader of a stupidly unknown idol group struggling for recognition. Ambitious and overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility he felt towards all the others who were fighting for his dream along with him. And *him*, sitting on the chair opposite from him in this meeting room, next to Dr. Ji: Sung Hanbin. Hao knew a few things about Sung Hanbin. He knew he was an idol, he knew he was a damn good dancer, he knew he was a year younger than he was. And, he guessed, now he knew that he, too, was racking his brain about this matter, about whether or not he should agree to the insanity their respective bosses were asking of them.

“Why us?” Hanbin hadn’t spoken a word until now. He’d been sitting in silence, his big eyes focused on whoever was talking, his back straight and his hands hidden to Hao’s eyes.

“Well,” Dr. Ji started, after a quick look shared with Mr. Lee. “There’s a few reasons. Our companies are relatively friendly to each other, both your groups are more or less on the same level, similar sale-values,” so, Hao reasoned, very bad sales. “You debuted around the same time, also. And you’re approximately the same age, which makes it all easier. More believable.” Hao wanted to say that there were other people in their own groups that fit all the criteria she had just mentioned.

“I see that,” Hanbin replied, his voice soft. “But why me, specifically, and why Zhang Hao-nim?”

Mr. Lee sighed, he took a look at Hao, and then he sighed again. "The fact is that you've never had official girlfriends, the kind newspapers talk about. And-"

"And we look gay enough?" Hao cut him off. He was already tired of this conversation. "It's okay, you can say it, Lee-sajangnim." After all, wasn't that the ultimate reason why they'd both been summoned here? They had to look *believable*, they were saying. Believable, as they posed for social media and for the news. Believable, as they acted like they were dating. Each other.

"That's not-" Dr. Ji started, and she stopped immediately after. "It's not a matter of stereotyping people. Of stereotyping you. It's just, we need you to consider the option, and you two are the best fits for this endeavor."

"We'll give you some time to think it over," Mr. Lee said, getting up. "Come call us when you've decided."

Hao supposed there was very little to think over. The situation was clear: they were going to be disbanded. The company had no more money to invest on them, and they had failed in attracting the attention of the public. So, unless they found a way to gain some attention, there was no future for his group. Aw4ke, the group he'd worked his ass off for for the last five years of his life, was as good as gone. Unless. Unless they caught some attention in a non traditional way. Like making up some good, juicy, scandal. This was what they'd been suggesting: that he and Sung Hanbin of 5stars made the fans and the press believe they were dating. Media play, for attention. Queerbaiting, more or less. If you can call it such if at least one part is actually queer. Hao wished that, at least, there would have been some forewarning. Something that would have allowed him to come to this meeting more prepared, so that he wouldn't be sitting in front of a guy whom he'd seen maybe a grand total of five times before today, faced with the prospect of having to fake being in love with him. He also kinda wished they'd picked someone else. He wasn't fit for improvisation. He wasn't fit for dealing with the media. He was only fit for worrying and mulling things over, apparently.

Hanbin cleared his throat, Hao inhaled through his nose. "Zhang Hao-ssi, what do you think of this thing?" Hanbin was wearing a more serious expression than before. His back was less straight and he looked like he didn't want to be here. Hao understood.

"It's a desperate move," he said. Hanbin nodded. "Are you desperate enough?"

Hanbin took a deep breath. "My group is going to be put on hiatus. Our leader will have to enlist early," he supplied. "I- I don't know. It's like, if I say no, I'm just being selfish."

Hao looked away from him. He didn't really know what to say. They were both in a horrible position. Hao hadn't even contemplated saying no: the proposal sucked, there was no going around it. But there wasn't any real alternative, if he was honest. He had his back against the wall. And his only way out, apparently, was fighting his way out of this deadlock with the young man sitting opposite him. "It's bad," he agreed. "Hanbin-ssi, would you hate the idea of having to pretend with me?"

Hanbin kept silent. Until Hao looked back at him, he didn't utter a word. Only then did he let out a small smile. He shook his head. "We have to make it work," he said. "We can't waste the chance."

Hao sighed again. Hanbin was being nice, cooperative. Hao felt even more cornered. Fuck it. He was going to agree. "Ugh," he said. He had to look like he was really fine with this, even if he wanted to just go back under the covers. "My first public relationship, and it's been arranged by my boss." Hanbin huffed a laugh. Hao laughed too. It was too absurd to keep a straight face. This industry loved absurdities, though. Hao prayed he wasn't playing his cards wrong.

"Shall I call them back?" Hanbin was always polite, it was more than evident. It felt like this boy was almost too good, with the way he was looking at Hao as if he was making certain Hao was okay. And the way his shirt was perfectly ironed, his skin smooth and perfect and his voice level and soft. It was unfair that he hadn't had the success he so clearly deserved. Hao just nodded in reply.

"Ah," he added, almost an afterthought. "Hanbin-ah," Hanbin turned to him, already at the door. "Call me hyung. You're supposed to be my new boyfriend, after all." Hanbin's eyes went round. Hao smiled at him. What the fuck was he getting into.

The meeting wrapped up with surprising ease, with the two CEOs shaking hands and smiling widely at each other and at the two of them, and Hanbin smiling a bit awkwardly, too. Hao was sitting in silence in a car that was supposed to bring him to where his members were, in a dance studio, waiting for him to start some class or other. He wanted to go home, maybe. Where he could talk to someone else, where he could confess that he was worried about *everything*, because this new plan wasn't going to be easy, either. And where he could just take the weight of having to be reliable, always, all the time, off his shoulders. Instead, he closed his eyes. He took a deep breath. It would be successful. They

would make everyone believe they were dating, they would gain the attention of fans and media alike, and they would sell a lot. If the consequence was that everyone had more access to his private life, that everyone picked up on the fact that he was attracted to men, he could live with it. He would have to. How was he going to break it to his members, anyway? He hoped they would understand, he hoped they wouldn't judge him. Maybe he should have waited a bit longer, discussed this with them before telling Dr. Ji that he was up for this stupid-ass plan. He groaned.

"What was the meeting about, hyung?" he shouldn't have worried, Gyuvin was a nosy child. He'd always been, ever since he'd met him. He always knew everything about everyone, there wasn't anything that could escape him. He was impossible to hide anything from. "Is it something bad?"

Hao finished tying his shoes. He also fixed his hair in the mirror, and then he turned to face his younger member. He was staring at Hao with his eyebrows raised and his eyes big. Hao couldn't stand him when he was like this, it made it impossible to lie to him. He looked down. "Nothing bad, really," he started. If life was fair, he would have been having this first conversation with Kuanjui, but he'd fucking moved back to Taipei. Idiot. Hao sighed. "They wanted to discuss a publicity stunt, to try and sell a bit more."

"What do we have to do?" Gyuvin was a terrible person to have around, only because he was always up for anything. Hao wished he was a bit less agreeable. It was irrational, of course, but he needed to have someone to yell at. And Gyuvin couldn't be this person, of course.

"You don't have to do anything," he said, a bit too flippantly. "It's me. I have to date someone. For the media. You know how it works."

Gyuvin nodded, then he bit his lip. Hao sighed, waiting for the question that was coming. And, not two seconds later, "But who's the girl? Is she pretty? Do we know her?"

Okay, this was funnier than Hao had expected. Imagine *him* having to pretend to date a girl. Ridiculous. In that case, maybe, he would have let the group meet its failure. Well, probably not. But the attempt would have been doomed from the start, he guessed. "It's not a girl," he found himself smiling. Gyuvin gaped. "It's another idol, too. It's supposed to be mutually beneficial. And yes, I suppose he's pretty. Well, he's good looking, I won't lie. And, yes, again, I think you know him."

Gyuvin and Hao had been friends for a long time. If Hao was honest, he was one of the people he opened up to more easily. So, it was only natural that he would wait expectantly for Hao to go on. Gyuvin's face fell when he realized he wasn't going to tell him the name straight away. Hao made to go to the practice room, but he was stopped by Gyuvin's hand on his shoulder, pulling him back. "You're not going anywhere," Gyuvin said. "Unless you tell me a name."

Joking around was fun and all, but maybe it was more the fact that once he told Gyuvin the name than it would be real. There would be no going back. The group would know, this thing would be something that was going to happen for real. Oh god. Hao put on a smile. He did his best to look like he was hyped for this set-up. "Sung Hanbin from 5stars," he said. He wasn't looking at Gyuvin, but past him, when he added. "Won't we make a handsome couple?"

Hanbin was sitting on his bed, shielded from the world by a curtain he had installed when it became evident that they weren't going to escape this ugly dorm anytime soon. It hung from Matthew's bed — the top bunk bed — and it allowed him to turn his bottom bunk into a very claustrophobic private space. He had a book in his hands, he wasn't really reading it. It was some foreign novel, in a rather nice Korean translation, but the problem wasn't the book. No, the problem was that just five hours earlier he'd agreed to complete madness. He should have said no. He should have put his foot down. *If I say no, I'm just being selfish*, he'd said. Shit, maybe he was supposed to be selfish. Or maybe, agreeing to it and assuming he had this absurd superpower that could save the group was the selfish thing, and he should have just accepted that he was going to end up jobless.

"You okay?" Jiwoong had walked in the room Hanbin shared with Matthew. Maybe he'd picked up on the fact that he was ignoring everyone. He wasn't like this, usually.

"I'm reading," he mumbled. He *was* reading, his book was open in front of him and he was staring at the words printed on the paper. Jiwoong wasn't supposed to know that the words never reached Hanbin's brain.

"You can read in the living room too," Jiwoong said. "You know that those two nerds are reading too, anyway." Hanbin bit the nail on his thumb. The nerds, as Jiwoong had correctly identified them, Gunwook and Taerae, would immediately pick up on the fact that Hanbin wasn't able to absorb any concept from any book right now.

“Hyung,” he pulled the curtain open. “I think I fucked up,” Jiwoong was leaning against the wardrobe, with his glasses a bit askew on his face. He must have been napping.

“Do you need Matthew for this conversation?” Jiwoong was always honest in the way he never judged Hanbin for his codependent friendship with Matthew. But now, in complete, total, absolute honesty, Hanbin didn’t need anyone. He shook his head.

He bit his nail again. “I don’t think I can pretend to be anyone’s boyfriend. I don’t really know him, I don’t know anything about him. He’s cool, and he’s a good singer, and we’ve recorded some shows together across the years, but. Can I even act that well?”

Jiwoong sighed. He never replied straight away. He always took some time to think things through. Hanbin ripped off part of that damn nail with his teeth. They weren’t going to have any comeback anyway, so who cared about the state of his nails, pretty or ugly it didn’t matter. “You can still call it off, it’s not like you took any initiative yet,” was what Jiwoong ended up saying. “It’s just an agreement between agencies, if you call it off, it’ll be fine.”

Hanbin wanted to hit his head against the wall. “But you-” he stopped. “The hiatus. I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t do everything I could to prevent us from disappearing.” Jiwoong was staring at him with a blank expression. It was the third time he was telling him this. The other two times, Jiwoong had tried to reason that the future of their group wasn’t supposed to rest on any of their shoulders, they had just been unlucky. They didn’t need heroes, they only needed to keep working hard. Hanbin had argued that he knew any other member would have tried to do whatever they could, including this, including something even stranger. Jiwoong had kept his ground. “No heroes, Hanbin-ah,” he said, this time, too. “We’re singers. Performers, to an extent. But not heroes. If you don’t want to do it, it’s not your job to sacrifice yourself.”

“Oh, come on,” Taerae walked in, too. This room wasn’t big enough for all five of them, Hanbin wished that Matthew and Gunwook kept out of this. “You’re acting like someone asked you to sell your firstborn, hyung.”

“Hey,” Jiwoong’s warning. “It’s his private life, and it’s something quite personal, too.” Taerae held up his hands in surrender.

“I’m just saying,” he said. “He’s a hot guy, and it’s not like you’re straight.” Hanbin felt his face catch fire. What did this have to do with anything, now? “I get that you have to pretend and to give up some privacy, but is going out with him — and a few paparazzi — really this huge sacrifice? I mean.”

“And the fans eat up that kind of stuff,” Gunwook chimed in, from the doorway where he was standing, his frame taking up almost the entire cutout of the door. “Like, you don’t even have to do much, hyung.” Taerae hummed in reply. “But, of course, we get it. It’s ugly that we have to catch the spotlight like this, also because maybe you’ll have to face some backlash too. Even though I was thinking. If the reactions aren’t positive, the agencies will call it off even before they make any official statement, so there’s really not much to worry about.”

Hanbin sighed. It was both nice and upsetting that they’d ganged up on him like this, with their cute speeches and motivational smiles. “They’re right, you know,” Matthew finally spoke. He’d been half hiding behind Gunwook, but Hanbin knew he wouldn’t have let the whole group speak to him in his absence. “All of them. Jiwoong hyung is right, you can take a step back. But Tae and Gunwookie are right, too. It’s a step by step process. Just like dating anyone else. You get to know them, you get to learn to like them.”

“But on social media and on camera,” Gunwook added. Hanbin sighed, again. He had wanted to be left alone. He had wanted to think this over by himself. “Thanks,” he said. “For real.” Jiwoong’s gaze — which he caught unintentionally — was still a worried one.

The problem — because it *was* a problem, no matter what anyone had to say on the matter — was that Zhang Hao wasn’t any random guy. No, he was a half genius, from the little Hanbin knew of him. He was good at everything, he was smart, he spoke seven thousand languages and, yes, Hanbin had spent three hours watching every interview of him he could find on the Internet. When Zhang Hao had sat in front of him at the company, right after lunchtime, Hanbin had thought that this meeting would be about some collaboration project. Maybe they could dance together, it would be fun. They’d done something similar for a collaboration stage the year both their groups debuted, in the year end shows. It was how they’d formally met. Then, it wasn’t like they’d stayed friends or anything. And then the insanity of this publicity stunt. And Hanbin had always been the kind of student that never wants to disappoint the teachers, so how could he say no to anything that someone more adult than him might ask? So now he was sitting on the toilet, with the lid down and his pants still on, because everyone had occupied his room and he fucking needed to be alone, and all he could think about was that Zhang Hao had to become his boyfriend in a way that looked natural and also *felt* natural, otherwise it would never work. He closed his eyes. Idols from different groups falling in love. It was

possible, it must have happened to someone. Not just boys and girls, that was a given, but boys and boys, girls and girls too. It wasn't like they would be the first ones. Just the first one to do it in plain sight. How would it happen, if it wasn't something staged by Mr. Lee and Dr. Ji? A TV recording, some variety show? Isn't that how star couples meet? But none of their groups were promoting anything right now, very symptomatic of the tragic situation they were facing. How could they make it look natural? How would it happen naturally? Someone knocked on the door. A live broadcast. A dance cover. Then a dance challenge? Tiktok? Hanbin might have to run it over with Matthew and Gunwook, their brains were surely better than his own, but it might just work. Step by step, Matthew had said. And not every single step had to be a couple step.

First, Hao received an email. It was on his work address, but the object was weird, and when he looked at the sender every doubt was cleared. It was Sung Hanbin. And he'd put in, as an object, *I'm sorry, I didn't know how else to reach you*. Honestly, it got Hao curious. He skimmed the rest of the email in a couple seconds, then he started reading it in detail. *I asked my management to give me your contacts*, it started. *I thought they would give me your phone number, but this was what I got*. No wonders their companies didn't make any money, honestly. *Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I thought about how to set the plan in motion. I discussed it with the staff, too*. He then wrote how he wanted it to look natural. And then he gave him a heads-up of what he would do. *I'm going to do a live from the dance studio one of these days, and I'll dance to some random songs. I'll make sure to dance to one of yours, Hao-nim. Would you then please react to it? Not necessarily praise me, we're not supposed to be close now. You can just acknowledge it, then we can somehow meet up and do a full cover together or something. I don't really know. It sounded better before I wrote it down. Anyway, here's my number, too. Let me know. Bye bye*. Hao locked his phone. He stared at the wall for a few seconds. Sung Hanbin was already too much. A meeting and an email and Hao was already worn out by him. How was he supposed to reply to his message? Thank you for thinking about this! God. Hao should have never become an idol in the first place, that was the truth. No. No. He was going to be an even better idol, if anything. He copied Hanbin's number into his phone.

janghao

> *It's Hao hyung.*

> *I'll wait for your live.*

He had things to do. He had a novel to finish reading. It was way more important than staring at his phone like it would materialize Hanbin's reply in a split second.

> *Thanks for sharing your ideas with me, too.*

Two days later, Hao received a clip. He'd been spending his days dancing. He wasn't really required to, but he was a bit out of practice and if he had to film anything with Hanbin at any point he couldn't look worse than Hanbin. He would look worse, anyway, but just because Hanbin looked like he was born to dance, if Hao's explorations on YouTube had taught him something. Sometimes, he danced by himself. Other times, there were others practicing with him. Gyuvin, naturally, but also Quanrui or the very few trainees that still believed in this company. His whole group was with him, now, as they all revisited some of the choreographies from their first albums. Hao was always a bit emotional when it came to these songs, these performances. They'd been younger, and they'd dreamed too big. It hurt a bit, to think that maybe they'd just been naive. "Hao-ge," Quanrui's hair was unusually plastered to his forehead. "Let's take five?" Hao nodded. Five, ten. They could take three hours, they weren't really preparing for anything.

"Should we, like, film something for TikTok, while we're all here?" This was Seungeon. He was red in the face and his shirt was sticking to his shoulders and Hao wanted to cry.

"We can ask some staff? Where's Yunho-nim? He was here ten minutes ago," Hao was tired of this. They deserved good promo, but they deserved a good team, too. And if their manager just kept walking away at every given chance, they wouldn't be getting anything done, even if Hao got fucking married to Sung Hanbin. It would solve nothing. "We can all get changed, anyway. I'll get Yunho-nim to film us for TikTok. I'll deal with this."

"Hyung," Gyuvin started. *You don't have to*, he was going to say. He always said this.

"I said I'll deal with this."

Sung Han Bin

> *Hello, I hope you're doing okay! This is the clip of the dance cover. I know it's not perfect but it's the best I could do. You're not obligated to repost it or do anything with it, if my suggestion doesn't convince you.*

Hao clicked on the video. Yunho had probably gone to get coffee, so he wouldn't find him for a while, anyway. He sat down in the corridor outside the practice studio, his back to the wall, and he watched the whole minute and a half of Sung Hanbin's performance. He was good. Shit, he was better than those who topped the Billboard chart. Hao replayed it. And again. It was hypnotic, in a way. The precision of his movements, the control over every single detail. Not perfect his ass.

janghai

> *Thanks!*

> *You did really well, Hanbin!*

Sung Han Bin

> *Oh god.*

> *Thank you.*

janghai

> *I'll send you my part of the project ;)*

Sung Han Bin

> *No rush!!*

> *Have a nice day, Hao-nim.*

janghai

> *Hao hyung.*

"What are you looking at?" Quanrui all but ripped Hao's phone out of his hands. He'd come out of nowhere, Hao hadn't even had the time to lock his screen or anything. He looked at how Quanrui's highbrows went higher and higher as he watched Hanbin's video — because, clearly, fuck Hao's privacy. "Is he the one they picked for you?"

Hao cringed at his choice of words, but he nodded. Quanrui knew, of course. He'd been there when Gyuvin had made the four of them watch every single music video of Hanbin's group, because "he wanted to know what family they were marrying into". Hao, then but also now, had just wanted to tell them this wasn't funny. He'd said nothing, anyway, because deep down he was just too fucking glad that they were so okay with the fact that, at the end of the day, it was still two men.

"He dances well," Quanrui switched to Chinese. Which meant that he was about to say something that would possibly infuriate Hao. He only ever switched to Chinese if he wanted to discuss things the others shouldn't know about. Like. Feelings. "And you've been looking at that video for about ten minutes, Hao-ge. Is he that handsome? Or are you worried he won't like you? What's the story?"

"You know he'll have to fall for me," Hao replied, in Korean. "He's paid to do so."

"Then stop going crazy about him already," Quanrui said this in English, to spite him. Hao got up, took back his phone and walked off. He still had to find their manager.

Zhang Hao was quite different from what Hanbin had imagined. He was also how he had imagined he would be. These two things impossibly coexisted. Hao was in Hanbin's studio. Not that he had a personal studio, not at this company, but he spent enough hours in this place to be allowed to think of it as his. Anyway, now Hao was there, too. And he had insisted he would come, after sharing Hanbin's cover on TikTok — a smart move, Hanbin didn't think about TikTok. He should have. And then Hao had filmed himself dancing to the same song, stitched the two videos together on TikTok and captioned it with something like *we look like we should do it together*, and that had been his

way of throwing the ball back in Hanbin's court. It was like playing a game of chess, in a way. Hanbin had had to think about how to make it evident to the few thousands of followers that had paid attention to this interaction that he was going to invite Hao to his company. He'd posted the stitch on his group's insta stories, *omg*. Gunwook had suggested moving to the fan-messaging app. *Hao-nim shared my dance cover*, he'd written. *I'd be so happy to perform it with him just once*. Taerae had suggested the next message: *He has the vibes of someone I want to be friends with. Should I try to make friends with him?*

And now they were here, looking at their steps reflected in the mirror, getting used to each other, building a rhythm. Hao was an amazing dancer, with an eye for detail. It should have been evident from the way he was manipulating all their online interactions, from the posts he shared on Instagram, always mirroring Hanbin's own posts, in order to convince the people who were paying attention to them that they could really make a good pair of friends. If Hanbin shared he was reading a novel, then Hao asked for book recommendations. If Hanbin took photos of a pretty place, Hao would post a very complementary picture: cafès were met with bookshops, sunsets with thoughts about stargazing. This same carefulness, this desire to follow, to respond, to keep up and anticipate at the same time was obvious in the way he tried to keep up with Hanbin's dancing, glancing at him or at the mirror, but staring right ahead when Hanbin stole a glance at him.

"Are you warmed up now, Hao-nim?" Hanbin asked, just as he felt sweat run down his back.

"Do you train with people from outside your company often?" Hao asked back. Hanbin frowned slightly. "It looks like you know how to build synergy. In dancing."

Hanbin knew his face was already red for the effort. Still, he felt it turn redder. "I trained as a dance teacher," he said. "I mean, sometimes I actually do that. Mostly in workshops." He looked quickly at Hao's mildly surprised face. "I've always wanted to dance," he added, and it sounded silly. "I mean. Idol or not, I am a dancer. I love it. It's where I feel at home. So, really, I've always wanted to include it in my schedule. Not that it's that busy."

"Hanbin," Hao interrupted him. He was aware he was rambling. He knew that he sounded like a madman. He was kinda plagued by this anxiety to get along with Zhang Hao, he kept mulling it over, the way they might not work. The way everyone would never believe they liked each other to the point of going public about it. "It's beautiful that you love dancing so much," Hao said, simply. His eyes looked sincere. "I trained as a teacher, too. Vocal."

Hanbin was probably gaping. "So that's one more thing we share," he said, feebly. It was silly to say it like this, like a small child trying to make a best friend out of a deskmate with the same stickers on their pencil case. Hao's eyebrows shot up, then he half laughed.

"Let's get changed before we film the dance," Hao said.

Hanbin fixed his hair as best as he could. He should have taken a whole shower, if he was honest. But it seemed excessive to get all dressed up and fancied up for a TikTok. He ran his hand through his hair once more, praying that it would gain back some volume. He checked in the mirror, but everything made him feel like his looks weren't cooperating. His shirt looked basic, his hair fell kinda flat and his cheeks were still flushed from the practice. Hao, instead, looked great. He'd walked in a few minutes earlier, only to tell Hanbin that he would make a quick phone call to the company, and then he'd be ready. Hanbin had swallowed a groan of frustration. Hao's outfit was impeccable, the perfect mixture of training attire and cool clothes. And his face. Boy. He looked as fresh as someone who's just stepped out of a spa. He looked amazing. Hanbin was used to pretty faces, his own group members were pretty. Hao's face, though, was something you just can't take your eyes off of. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He turned away from the mirror and fished out his phone, running through the group chat with his members. Matthew was asking if he could stop by a convenience store before going home. Gunwook and Taerae had hopped on the train. *Hanbin hyung, I want cola*. *Hanbin hyung, can you buy me chips?* *Hanbin hyung I also need cough drops. Are you ill?* *Not yet*.

"I'm back," Hao closed the door behind himself. He looked the tiniest bit upset.

"Everything okay?" Hanbin shouldn't have asked, maybe. It wasn't like they were friends. "Sorry."

Hao shook his head. "My driver won't be here earlier than an hour and a half, maybe two." He didn't look pleased. "It'll take us no longer than a half hour, though."

"We might make lots of mistakes," Hanbin replied. And then something in his brain might have snapped, the connection between his brain and his mouth must have short circuited. Because he went on, "But, I mean, you could drink something with me, Zhang Hao-nim."

Hao looked at him for two whole seconds, then he blinked. "Okay," he said. "Yes." And then, "But you weren't thinking about alcohol, right?" And again, "Won't you be late, though?" Hanbin's smile grew as large as it could, he felt it in how his cheeks kinda burned with it. Hao's eyes were round and Hanbin kinda liked the way they matched the

shape of his surprised mouth. Maybe it wouldn't be this hard to be friends with him.

Hao sat cross-legged on the café's chair, a dark yellow, velvety thing. His eyes kept wandering around the café. He'd let Hanbin take him where he wanted, claiming he didn't know the area. So, Hanbin had led him to one of his favorite spots, both because it was close to the company, and because he hoped Hao could like the place he would take him to. So he was biting his nails again, as he waited for the barista to finish making their lattes. The TikTok had turned out cool, the afternoon was going well, but Hanbin couldn't shake the feeling of uneasiness from his stomach. What if Hao went back home and called the whole thing off? What if Hanbin wasn't good enough for him? He took a deep breath. It was just a business agreement, there was no way Hao would pull back, he had as much to lose as Hanbin did.

"I'm going to ask you something," Hao said after a few seconds of silence. Hanbin nodded. "How did your group members react to this- this thing?"

Hanbin laughed. It would be kinda humiliating to tell the whole story. He shook his head. "They encouraged me a lot," he said. "They're good people, you know."

Hao took another sip of his latte. Some foam stuck to his upper lip. Hanbin looked away. "No one complained about it?" He kept inquiring.

Hanbin suppressed a sigh. "Why would they? This is supposed to help them, more than anyone else." He thought he knew what Hao was getting at, but it was just because he didn't know them the way Hanbin did.

"Because I'm a man," Hao said. He said it with a very serious face, too. As if he was daring Hanbin to dismiss his objection. As if he was telling him to face it, to look at the issue straight in the eyes.

Hanbin took yet another deep breath. "They wouldn't," he tried to articulate it better. "They really were encouraging, Hao-ssi. I wouldn't lie to you. Also, they've always been supportive on this matter." He wasn't going to say the whole truth, not right now. He wasn't going to tell Hao that they had to face the issue multiple times during their life together, from the first time Taerae had confessed in a fit of tears that he didn't like girls. He was fourteen. Hanbin, fifteen at the time, hadn't known how to help him. Not two years later, the roles had been reversed. It hadn't even ended there. But he wasn't telling all this to Hao, not when there were others involved. Not when they were in a public space. Not when he didn't know how Hao dealt with other people's secrets. "You'd like them. Maybe. I hope."

Hao nodded. "That's good," he smiled. "Mine, too. They're really okay with who I am." Ah. Hanbin felt like an asshole, now. He bit his lip. "Maybe I'm too nagging as a leader, but that's really the only thing they resent." He was still staring at Hanbin with some degree of dare in his gaze. Hanbin hadn't passed the test yet. He found himself desperate to pass, to get Hao's trust and approval. It was as if he knew that the following months depended on the answer he gave now. Whether getting along and fooling the press together would go smoothly or would be insanely difficult: it all came from what he would say next. So he sipped on his latte, too sweet for his stressed out stomach.

"I'll be honored," he said, "to find out who you really are. And I'll be more than okay with it." Hao's shoulders relaxed. Hanbin hadn't failed. Shit. Was this thing supposed to be so anxiety inducing? "Please be curious about me, too." He half mumbled, trying to finish his latte, just to do something with himself.

Hao smiled, something magnetic in his smile. His eyes fluttered a bit. "This place is nice," he finally said. Jesus, couldn't Hanbin have been paired up with someone less cryptical.

"So you just went on a date with him?" Hao wished he wasn't having this conversation via Skype. If Kuanjui was sitting in front of him — like he should, to be fair — and not in another country, he would be able to slap him on his knee for the insanity he was spewing.

"Not a date, you ass," Hao shushed him. The fact that they were chatting in Chinese wasn't really a protection, not with Quanrui roaming around the dorm and being more than willing to stick his nose in Hao's business. "He just kept me company as I waited for Yunho-nim to pick me up."

"And paid for your coffee, in this *very nice place* you've mentioned like fifteen times, and he told you about his mom's own café, and promised to take you there, then you asked about his family?"

"Because he *mentioned* it," Hao knew what he'd done had nothing to do with *dating*, and everything to do with being a decent conversation partner. He also knew that listening to Hanbin talk had been nice. And maybe he could have been much more unlucky. Playing this weird press-game with Hanbin wouldn't be too hard.

"So he mentioned his mother, and you asked about siblings, and he told you about that, and then you straight up told him that your own family isn't too happy that you're an idol." Hao had just said that he thought Hanbin was lucky

his family supported him. Because his own family kinda insisted that he go back to China. And that he joined a classical orchestra or something. A music career? Yes. A performer's career? Not so much. "But, yeah, sure. Not a date."

"You're an asshole," Hao just said. Kuanjui's happy, high-pitched laugh was always entertaining to witness. He was the kind of person that laughs with their whole body. And now that he was talking through a laptop, he often knocked down the laptop in the process. Which happened now, too. Kuanjui's soft *fuck* made Hao laugh, too.

"Okay," Kuanjui's face was back in the frame, his eyes filled with joy. "So. Anyway. The important questions, now." Hao nodded. "Is he hot?"

Hao felt his face heat up. "You've seen his photos. I know you have." There was no way he wouldn't have. He was just too up in Hao's business not to. Hao would never really complain about Kuanjui's nosiness, though. He *missed* it. He missed him sticking his nose in all his things all day long, when they both had very little to do. He missed him trying to pry in Hao's private life all the time, fishing for information about his family, about his interests, about the things he couldn't really share with the rest of his group.

"Yeah, yeah, but photos are edited, TikTok has filters and you've seen him from up close. What's he like?" Kuanjui had no idea of the thing he was asking of Hao. Or maybe he did and he was a much bigger asshole than Hao had thought.

He looked away. "He's tall." He started. "And he's got tattoos." Kuanjui let out a long, surprised, *Oh*. "And he's attractive."

"Hao," Kuanjui was going to die. Hao would find a way to send someone to kill him in Taipei. Or maybe he would invite him back as his guest and poison him. "I *know* he's attractive, he's a fucking idol. Is he *hot*?"

Why wasn't anyone coming to interrupt him? To tell him that dinner was getting cold or something? Gyuvin was so great at cutting conversations off? "Yes." It was as if he'd had to admit to something really uncomfortable. "He's hot. He's *really* hot. He's got this smile that-" he cleared his throat. "I've answered."

Kuanjui was laughing again. He hoped his laptop outright shattered on his floor. "No, no. Go on. His smile?"

"Really, Jui. Fuck you." Hao wanted to change the topic. To talk about something else entirely. Because, honestly, he didn't want to focus on the way Hanbin had made him feel. He didn't really need to focus on it, either. It wasn't like he actually had to build a true relationship with him, they only needed to get along. Except it was too easy. Because Hanbin was nice, he was *kind*. He'd noticed Hao was upset after the phone call with Yunho, in a way his own members almost always failed to notice. He'd picked up Hao's wistful tone when he'd just said *it's nice your mom is your biggest fan*. He'd listened to him. All very basic things, to be fair, Hao's bar was possibly on the floor. But he'd liked this kind of attention. He'd liked that Hanbin had laughed at his jokes and that he'd made him feel at home in his dance studio. But, of course, Hanbin was doing it because it was, literally, their job, right now, to get along. Trying to fit with each other was the project they were both working on. And not by free choice.

"Hao," Kuanjui spoke again. "Don't stress about this thing too much, okay?" Yeah. Hao? Not stressing about something? Sounded very unlikely. "You had a good time today, and he probably did, too. At least get *this* out of this thing, okay? Have fun!"

Hao wanted to see the world the way Kuanjui saw it. Instead, he saw it with rage. "Fun? How *fun* will it be when he and I get slandered because we're in a gay relationship? It'll get us some attention, yes, very good from overseas and very bad from here. And-"

Kuanjui had always known what Hao was thinking, at all times. It was frustrating. "And will he be okay with it? Won't he regret doing this with you and faking with you? And now everyone will call him gay," he was mocking Hao's own lamenting tone. "*Hao*. He chose it! And you don't even know that he's straight."

Hao couldn't reply. He tried to say something but his brain didn't conjure up any word. Kuanjui smiled through the camera. "But he didn't say anything when I-"

"And *maybe* you tried to corner him into saying it, don't you think?" Hao hated that he was kinda right. "Anyway. When are you seeing him again?" Kuanjui was twirling his hair around his finger. He was horrible in every way.

Hao considered the option of lying to him. "I told him we should hang out for a walk in a few days," he said, in the end. He thought they should just walk through the shopping streets, get something to eat, some silly souvenirs to post on their Insta stories, letting everyone speculate if they'd clicked so well by just filming a TikTok. "I'll text him to set a time."

Kuanjui laid down on his mattress, bringing the laptop along, shaking it everywhere. It looked like he was filming a spaceship landing. "Haven't you texted him back yet since yesterday?"

Hao shook his head. "He texted yesterday night to ask if I was back home safe, I replied. He said he was glad. The

end.” Kuanjui’s laughter was even louder than before.

“Shit, Hao.” He looked at something beyond the laptop, maybe someone. He nodded. “Listen, dude, I have to leave, I have rehearsals for the ballet. Will you fly to see me when it opens, by the way?” Hao would. He definitely would. He didn’t care if his management wouldn’t let him. Kuanjui had got into this amazing dance company and Hao would kill his own mother, if it meant he got to see his best friend on a stage. “I gotta go. But text the poor kid back, come on. He really sounds nice, don’t you ruin this for yourself.” Hao smiled at him, nodding.

Hao sat on his bed for a while longer, looking at the empty video call layout in front of him. Kuanjui leaving had left a hole in his life. He was happy for him, clearly. But he missed him, he missed having a friend he could depend on so strongly. He knew he could call him, but he missed having him *here*. And it wasn’t a coincidence that he’d called him the day after his trip to Sung Hanbin’s company. Hao had been scared when he’d come home the previous night. Spending the entire afternoon with Hanbin had made him forget about the situation he was going to come home to. He’d forgotten that he would have to deal with Gyuvin’s terrible report card, and with a couple of angry staff members that would berate him for not encouraging his dongsaeng to study more. He’d forgotten that he would have to phone his mom and listen to her ask him, again, when he was going to visit them back home. And Hanbin — stupidly attractive Hanbin with his bright smile and his insane talent for dancing — had no right to be this powerful, not when Hao didn’t even know him. Hanbin wasn’t supposed to make him forget about his problems. Hanbin was just supposed to be his coworker. On a delicate project, but still his coworker. He wasn’t supposed to make him feel like he’d found the same peace he’d found with Kuanjui. The same easily-reached serenity. And he wasn’t supposed to also be hot. *Fuck*. Hao took a deep breath. He’d always been good at strategizing. All this? It was just his nerves. It wasn’t anything else. Kuanjui’s penchant for gossip had turned it into something else, too. He should count his victories: Hanbin was pleasant, he was cooperative, and he wouldn’t cause problems. This mattered. The rest, didn’t.

“You don’t really wear bucket hats, so go for this one,” Hao pushed a baseball hat in his hands, taking a similar one — in a different color — from a stand. The souvenir shop they were in was crowded with tourists. “Try it on, come on.” Hanbin pushed the hat down his head, it looked exactly like any other hat he’d ever owned. He didn’t know what he was supposed to say.

“Will it do?” He asked.

“Sure,” Hao flashed a smile in his direction. He put his own hat on, staring at himself in the mirror. Hanbin caught the moment when their eyes met in the reflection. He looked away. “As long as you say I made you buy it and all that stuff, I don’t know. You’re better at fan apps than I am.” Hanbin refused to believe it.

“Okay,” he said, placatingly. Hao threw him a dirty look. “Okay, *hyung*.”

The café was reviewed on Instagram as a “very photogenic spot” and it was overcrowded with couples and groups of people wanting to make their own profiles better. “I’m not going to queue for a photo with some coffee,” Hao said.

“Let’s take a photo with the queue,” Hanbin said. Hao didn’t have any chance to stop him, he was already taking a photo of the people before them and then he was putting his fingers in a V position in front of the camera, with the queue as a backdrop. “Come on, *hyung*,” he nudged Hao with his shoulder. Hao complied.

After a few minutes, he was looking with all of his focus at Hanbin typing on his phone. They were sitting on a bench in a park, with some take-away coffee. Hao was holding both cups, as Hanbin set up his post about their misadventure with the café. *It was too popular*, he typed before he sent the photo with their hands in the shot. *So we had to adapt*, and he snapped a pic of Hao’s occupation as a cup holder.

“Do they reply?” he inquired. His own posts were never met with enthusiasm. Hanbin looked relaxed while sending messages to his fans, though.

“They usually do,” he said. “It’s not life-stopping numbers, but it’s nice.” He showed Hao his screen. *Who’s that, oppa?* someone had replied. Hanbin smiled. *Are you having a nice date?*

“No, *you* were the one who said we should watch the blockbuster,” Hanbin was trying not to laugh too loud in the cinema foyer. Hao was wearing the most disappointed face he’d ever seen him sport.

“You said you like superheroes,” Hao repeated. “I didn’t know these films were so bad, though. Everyone talks about them all the time. I thought-” Hanbin half snorted, with the way he looked genuinely upset at how bad he’d found the movie. “Don’t *laugh*,” Hao sounded so offended, it made Hanbin only laugh harder. “I’ll have to share that we came to see this *thing* and it sucks, and *you* dragged me here. I’ll make you look so bad, Hanbin-ah.”

Hanbin took a deep breath, trying to hold back laughter. And another. “I’m so sorry,” he managed. “You can pick the next one?”

Hao disliked the rain. Hanbin wanted to go for a walk. No, scratch that. He wanted them to post about going on a walk. “In the rain?”

“We could be sharing an umbrella,” Hanbin was saying, from the other side of the phone. “Gunwook said it looks romantic,” he added. And, apparently, Park Gunwook, Hanbin’s group’s maknae, was a genius strategist, because they kept following his suggestions, and everything seemed to work. More or less.

“No,” Hao said. “We’re staying inside. I don’t care, I’m not getting caught in the rain with you.” Hanbin sighed. He was silent for a few moments.

“Museum?” He said. “Art gallery? Lotte World?”

“Museum,” Hao replied, maybe a bit lightheaded at the thought. “Dress nicely. I’m taking photos.”

“Oh, so that’s what you usually do,” Taerae was making Hanbin so fucking nervous. He’d joined him, he needed to buy clothes too, apparently. “You actually *do* the things you post about.”

Hao was staring at him like he didn’t know what to reply. Maybe because it was impossible to reply to him. “Did you think me and Hao hyung met up, took a photo and went home?”

Taerae shrugged. “I mean, that’s what it takes. It’s not like there’s a wave of fangirls following you around.” Hanbin sucked in a breath. Hao, instead, broke out in laughter. Hanbin turned to look at him. What a betrayal.

“I’m buying these,” Hao said, showing him a couple of T-shirts. They looked comfy. Pretty, too. Hao often opted for very comfortable outfits, at least when he saw him. Hao lifted an eyebrow.

“Ah, yes. They’re cool, go for it.” He said. Hao smiled.

“Jesus,” Taerae was probably rolling his eyes, by the sound of it. “This bad already.”

“You haven’t read it?” Hanbin was gaping. Openly gaping at him in the middle of a bookstore downtown. Hao felt like he’d just offended his ancestral gods. He shook his head. “Oh my god,” Hanbin had a hand over his chest, as if it hurt. “Can I buy it for you?”

“Are you forcing me to read your favorite book?” Hao wasn’t confused, he was something else. Something that made him imagine that he would talk with Hanbin extensively about this book, if he read it. And that, alone, could make him enjoy the read.

“Not if you don’t want to,” Hanbin folded. He was always too nice. Hao took the book from the shelf. He wasn’t really good at reading in Korean. Hanbin, on the other hand, knew a lot of words. Too many.

“Just don’t take it personally if I don’t finish it,” he replied. Hanbin was beaming. He took the book from Hao’s hand and ran to the checkout. Hao’s Instagram story featured the new novel on his nightstand.

Hanbin bit down on the piece of tteokbokki they were sharing. “This will ruin your aesthetic feed,” he said. The tteokbokki cart made the best food Hanbin had ever tasted, and he’d insisted they went there. He knew that Hao would have a hard time finding a way to integrate it in his always perfect stories and posts.

“Your face will make up for the surroundings,” Hao stated, calmly. Hanbin coughed. The rice cake was half stuck

in his throat. “Well, if you don’t go blue and die on me.” Hanbin coughed once more. The fuck? “You okay, Hanbin-ah?”

“What do you mean, my face? I have no makeup on, my hair is flat, my jacket-”

“In this narrative, we went out for an impromptu snack. We missed each other, I don’t know. Are we even already dating? Or are we still falling for each other?” Hao had a mechanical way of talking about this that always threw Hanbin for a bit of a spin. “This tteokbokki is too good, I want one more. I’ll go get it.”

“Friends or more?” Fans and non-fans speculate about numerous posts from two idols of different groups.

“Fans from all over the world have been speculating if the Instagram stories and fan-app posts are just coincidences or if the two idols are trying to hint at something else. Zhang Hao, leader of the four-membered group Aw4ke, who debuted in 2020, and Sung Hanbin, active in 5stars and who’s gone viral a few times for his dance covers, are being closely scrutinized by their fans — and a lot more people — because of their recent social media activity. After posting a dance together, the two idols have started spending what looks like a lot of time together. Some of their activities are known to have been shared: Zhang Hao admitted to having been to the cinema with his friend; Sung Hanbin confirmed it a few days later, when he also appeared on an Instagram story from Zhang Hao. The two look comfortable with each other, if they’re together so often-”

“Now you’re making it up,” Seungeon interrupted Gyuvin’s passionate interpretation of a very stupid online article. Hao was hating every second of this whole thing. From the way the article was written, as if the fans were delusional for thinking he could actually date Hanbin, to the way Gyuvin had begged everyone to be home because he had something important to discuss with them, only to show up with a printed version of this idiocy and start declaiming it from up on a chair.

“I swear, it’s written here, look,” Gyuvin held the paper out for Seungeon to take a look. Hao sighed. “May I go on?”

Quanrui clapped emphatically, begging Gyuvin to march on. Hao didn’t know what was the fun in this whole show. Okay, the article was a huge step forward. But, did they need to make a whole pantomime of it? “You okay, hyung?” And here came the problem himself: Hanbin. Who wasn’t even supposed to be here in the first place. But Gyuvin had called Hao when he was out with him, and it sounded so fucking urgent and Hanbin had a car and here they were. Both of them listening to what the Internet thought of them. Hao was also trying really hard not to think about the fact that Hanbin was in his home, and that his members were in the same room as Hanbin for the first time, and that Hanbin was possibly forming some opinion about these three idiots.

“I just wish I were somewhere else,” he replied. Hanbin smiled quietly at him. He waited for Hao to turn back to Gyuvin before doing the same.

“So, where was I,” Gyuvin cleared his throat. “Ah, yes. The two look comfortable with each other, if they’re together so often. But is friends the right word for them? Fans have started putting two and two together even about the social media posts that have nothing to do with the other person, apparently. Zhang Hao has shown interest in books, as of recent, and the titles are all too familiar for Hanbin’s die hard fans.” Gyuvin stopped. “Really? You’re making Hao hyung develop a literary culture just for this?”

Hao’s cheeks caught fire. Hanbin broke out in a hearty laugh. “Go on, go on,” he waved him off. Hao didn’t have it in him to look at him right now.

“One fan wrote, *I support Hao whatever he does. If this is the boy he’s chosen for himself, I’ll support him too.* Another was more sceptical, *Friendships between two men should be encouraged without immediately calling two friends gay.* But the dating theory has a lot of supporters, *they’re surely not the first two same-sex idols dating but they might be the first ones making it clear for everyone following them.*” Gyuvin paused before reading the rest. He threw a happy look at the room. “*I hadn’t heard of either group before, but this story made me check them out. I’m rooting for them, whether they’re dating or not, they deserve all the success.*” He jumped down from the chair, which made Hao worry that he was going to break an ankle and be stranded from rehearsals for months. Hoping that they would soon start rehearsing something new. “Your crazy strategy is working!”

Hao fought against the smile spreading on his face. It was working. There was still a long way to go. But it was working. Their few fans had made enough noise to be picked up from other fans and catch their attention, starving as they were for such things. Hanbin, on his side, was smiling too.

“Is Hao hyung too much to handle?” Seungeon was looking at Hanbin like he was some sort of celebrity. He was sitting hyper-straight on the edge of the couch, and he was visibly hanging from Hanbin’s lips.

Hanbin looked at Hao. It was quick, Hao would’ve missed it if he hadn’t already been watching him. “Not at all,” he replied, polite as always. There were occasions, and this was one of these, when Hao just wanted him to explode and be rude. Just for once. Just to be a little bit more human.

“Really?” Seungeon sounded almost disappointed. “Doesn’t he stress you about what to wear, and how, and how to sit in places, and how to look better in photos, and what to buy and where, and-”

“He looks good already without instructions,” Gyuvin cut in. Hao could see the smirk he was trying to hide. He thought he was so fucking smart, didn’t he. Hanbin laughed again. He looked like he was having the best night of his life. Hao was a bit envious of the way he’d just sat back and enjoyed Gyuvin’s show, relaxed and light-hearted. Even now, it was like he *liked* Hao’s members’ company. As if he was having fun.

“He takes instructions better than you all,” Hao commented, without raising his voice.

Gyuvin had the nerve to whistle at that, as Seungeon just stared at him in disbelief. “Hyung,” Hanbin was still laughing. His full laughter. The one that sometimes had him in tears. “What’s with that phrasing?” Hao resolutely stared ahead. Hanbin went on. “It’s not a hassle. Hao hyung is fun to go out with,” he sounded like he meant it. Like he wasn’t just playing nice because Hao was sitting right beside him. “And when he points out details, it’s because he works for the best outcome.” Seungeon nodded, almost solemnly.

“But, doesn’t he boss you around all the time?” Quanrui, too? There was really no peace for Hao.

Hanbin looked at him with his eyes shining from laughter. “Maybe I’m just as hard to be with, but it’s not an effort. We kinda match, don’t we?”

Hao was taken aback. *Did* they match? They had something viscerally similar, maybe it was the desperation leading them to be up for this insane plan in the first place. Or maybe it was something else entirely, and Hao was just making himself deliberately blind to it. “The PDs really knew what they were doing, pairing us up.” Hanbin’s laughter didn’t falter this time, either.

It felt weird, wishing Hanbin a good night on the front door. It felt too intimate, almost like they were really friends, almost like the kids from the online comments had understood too much about them already. Hanbin had his easy-going smile on, when he disappeared behind the elevator doors. Hao sighed. He had hoped the press would catch onto their relationship, as fake as it was, but this made it real. It made the last month in their life something propaedeutic to a bigger, absurdly bigger, follow-up. One thing was having coffee with Hanbin, talking to him about the exams they were preparing for in school, sharing stories about their friends and colleagues, taking stupid photos of the stuff they bought together. A whole different thing would be showing affection to him in public hoping that paparazzi caught them, making posts online about how lucky they were to have each other, planning answers for Instagram lives where someone would inevitably ask about how it was between them. Why couldn’t he just hang out with Hanbin without the whole circus? Fuck. What was he even thinking: he had basically *met* Hanbin because of the whole circus, with the whole circus as their ultimate goal.

Sung Han Bin

> *Your friends are fun, hyung. I know you wanted to see that movie tonight, but I still had a nice time.*

> *Also, if you want, I looked up the screening times for tomorrow and we could go at 20.30 if you’re free, I can pick you up.*

janghao

> *You only like them because you don’t have to spend everyday with them*
> *Anyway, I don’t want you to feel guilty for the movie. I can watch it online*

Sung Han Bin

> *lol*

> *But I got invested in the plot you told me about!*

> *I really am free tomorrow night :(*

> *Let me know if you make up your mind!!*

janghao
> *Then let's go.*
> *Thank you Hanbinah*

Sung Han Bin

> *What for???*

> *See you tomorrow! Good night <3*

janghao

> *Night!*

Chapter 2 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/50821996/chapters/130135411>): Part Two

Summary:

A deranged ploy to catch the media attention.

Notes:

Hi! I'm back!! So, it's long. I know. Idk what to say, sit down and grab multiple cups of tea? Coffee? Or break it down in as many parts as it suits you, ten train rides idk you're free. This is just to make sure that you don't go in at 3am and then are like "shit i had work in the morning". Been there, done that, I don't recommend it.

Anyway. No major trigger warnings, just some alcohol consumption. Also, I'm clearing any doubt before it arises: it's a dream. I'm sorry.

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_2_endnotes\)](#).)

There was something to be happy about, apparently. At least, the others were all smiling and chattering, all excited. Hanbin was still staring at the email they'd received, all of them. He wasn't quite absorbing its content. "Hyung," Matthew's voice kinda brought him out of this stupor. "Hyung, did you read?" Hanbin wished he could say yes, but it was as if he hadn't even opened the email. He'd been hit by the object alone. *Reprinting your album!*

"Not really," he said. He was going to ask them, maybe someone would be so kind as to explain it to him like he was a child, because he felt rather stupid right now.

Matthew's eyes lit up, he was smiling from ear to ear. "They're printing more copies of our album," he explained. "Because people have been asking for it! We're making it, we're going to record more music soon!" Hanbin felt himself smile, before he'd even understood what Matthew was implying. He looked around, the five of them were all in a dance studio, one their company rented out to keep them in shape. Gunwook was half-crying, and Jiwoong was patting him on the shoulders, as Taerae was texting someone on his phone. Maybe he was the only one replying to the email, it was likely.

"Did they talk about new music? In the email? Did Dr. Ji mention it?" Hanbin wouldn't believe it until he was on a stage promoting a song. Not any earlier. It had been *so* long. It felt like they were already doomed, so all of this was totally unbelievable.

"Yes," Matthew's energy was contagious. Hanbin started laughing, too. They were recording new stuff? Soon? They would survive a bit longer as a group, this was what this meant. Hanbin felt like he'd been holding his breath for too long a time. He felt tears behind his eyes. He looked away from Matthew.

"We should celebrate, don't you think?" He said. There was more than cause for celebration. It was all he could think of, the five of them sharing a table at a bar, almost like they'd done when they'd heard they would debut. It had been a celebration with no alcohol, they were too young back then. Now, if he was honest, he wanted to drink until he forgot all the stress this situation had caused him.

"Totally," Matthew said. He was still smiling extra-widely. Hanbin just hugged him. Matthew's hands locked around him in answer. It felt like everything would turn out for the best. They were going to make it out of this quagmire with some decent choreography and a new song. "Have you heard from your friend yet?"

Hanbin moved back. “Hao hyung?” Matthew raised one brow. Yeah, of course he meant Hao. Their new chance at success had been brought by Hao’s efforts too. “Should I call him?”

“Well, maybe text him,” Matthew replied. “Maybe he’s busy. This isn’t so urgent.” Hanbin knew he was right. But he also knew that he kinda wanted Hao to reply as quickly as he could, if he were to talk to him. He nodded.

“Let’s tell Jiwoong hyung about our partying plans first,” he changed the topic.

hanbinsung

> hao hyung!! Are you free tonight?

Zhang Hao :D

> Tonight? Yes.

> Why?

hanbinsung

> Going out for a drink with Jiwoong hyung, Matthew, Taerae and Gunwookie

> Got great news today, I’d like to tell you about it too

> But are you coming out with us?? :)

> Tell it to the others, too!!

Zhang Hao :D

> I’ve never been out with your friends?

> But I’ll ask the others, I’ll let you know.

> Still, tell me about the good news, I’ll listen to you

hanbinsung

> I know you’ll listen to me, you always do

Zhang Hao :D

> Just tell me the story, Sung Hanbin.

> I don’t have all day

Hao was sitting in a taxi with his group members being super loud. Gyuvin, specifically, was the kind of person that should come with a volume regulation button. He shouldn’t have accepted the invitation. Now he would spend his night in this bar he didn’t know with too many people he didn’t know. And the fact that Hanbin would be there, well, it didn’t ease his nerves. Hanbin had been too happy, earlier. He had every right to celebrate his group getting the slightest bit of recognition, but there was too much happiness in his smile in the Face Time call he’d put Hao through. And Hao had found himself mirroring his smile and nodding when Hanbin had asked about the night out once again, and Hanbin’s smile had somehow turned even brighter when he’d understood that Hao said yes. “Really?” he’d asked, and Hao had no way of saying no to him, now. So he’d said yes. Again. He didn’t want to think about it, though. He didn’t want to focus on the way his brain switched off everytime Hanbin smiled with his eyes too.

“I’ve read somewhere that they’ve got, like, an American kid on the team. You can talk to him, Quanrui,” Gyuvin was saying, his voice too loud, possibly drilling through Hao’s head.

“He’s Canadian, Gyu,” Hao corrected, without thinking much about it.

“Oh, he’s Canadian,” Gyuvin echoed, and he sounded like he was making fun of Hao. “And you’re really informed about them, aren’t you, hyung?” What was he supposed to do? Ignore everything about Hanbin’s best friend? Not know anything about the people he worked and lived with?

“I should have let you embarrass yourself, I guess,” he concluded. Seungeon laughed, patting Hao’s leg from where he was sitting next to him.

“Tell us what you know of the others,” he said. “So we’ll make a good impression.”

They were all different from what Hao had imagined. But they also felt incredibly familiar, because he’d heard so

much about them from Hanbin that it was like meeting the characters from a book you've read and seeing them in a different setting. Hanbin was sitting next to him, and he was also kinda mediating the introductions, being the only one who knew everyone already. Hao watched him do his magic, laugh at everyone's jokes, pilot the conversation in a direction he knew would fit the parts involved.

"I've heard that you play the violin," Taerae said to Hao, suddenly. He was the only one he'd already met. It didn't make him any less nervous.

"Ah," he did his best to smile. "Yes. I used to teach it, too."

"Cool," Taerae had a nice smile. His clever eyes were studying Hao. He didn't know what he was supposed to say. "I play guitar," Taerae added, maybe trying to get Hao to say something more. He really couldn't come up with anything to say to him in answer.

"He's really good at it, too," Hanbin said, and Hao shouldn't have felt this relieved. "I'll have to show you his videos, hyung." Hao nodded at him. Hanbin nudged him with his shoulder, Hao nudged him back. When he turned back to Taerae, his expression was unreadable. He smiled at Hao, once more.

"So," Taerae said. "Let me have you talk with the smartest person we brought along." Hao noticed Hanbin was talking with Matthew and Seungeon together, they were all laughing. "Gunwook-ah, come here, meet Hanbin hyung's Zhang Hao hyung."

Gunwook was actually as smart as Hanbin had always said, in spite of his young age. Hao felt like all his tension about the night had dissipated, just after five minutes of talking to him. He could hold any conversation with ease, and he had a fond way of talking about everyone else that made Hao believe that they could all be friends without any real problem. He found himself laughing out loud when Gunwook and Taerae started making fun of the oldest members in their group, and when they started imitating their CEO he was smiling so hard his cheeks hurt. Gyuvin had joined this side of the conversation and he was replying in kind, with stupid anecdotes about their own company. "The CEOs should have been a couple," Gyuvin mentioned, after a while, when it became obvious that most of their problems were shared. "Not the hyungs."

"The hyungs don't look bad together," Taerae mentioned, off-handedly. Hao dared to turn to Hanbin, just to see if he'd heard. But he was still busy talking with Seungeon and Matthew, and he looked more than fine while he did that, so Hao just turned back. Gunwook was staring at him when he did, Hao threw him a smile. Gunwook smiled back.

"Hanbin hyung is a good person," Gunwook said, and he said it in a very low voice. Hao wouldn't have heard him if he weren't looking at him. "He cares about us a lot, he only wants the best for us." Hao nodded. It was true, he agreed. Hanbin had a striking capacity to care about everyone. He liked that about him, he liked how it emerged from the different ways he had of talking about every one of them.

"I know," he said. "I see that."

"Let him care about you, too," Gunwook said. What did he mean? How could Hao compare to Hanbin's members? He was in such a different position, he- "You'll see what I mean, Hao-nim."

Hao wasn't much used to drinking, he cared too much about his health to get drunk on a regular basis. Still, his cheeks felt warmer from the drinks he'd had, and he was glad when the cold air hit his face. Quanrui and Seungeon were trying to get a taxi, holding Gyuvin between them. He didn't look too stable. Hao would have to make sure he got washed and drank some water before he fell asleep.

"Hao hyung," Hanbin's eyes were shining, maybe from the alcohol, maybe because he was actually happy. Hao couldn't help the thought that the streetlights didn't do justice to his face, to the redness of his cheeks.

"Hey," he said. "Button up your jacket, Hanbin-ah," he chided. "You'll catch a cold, I need you to be healthy." Hanbin's eyes went rounder, as he complied without a word.

He looked back up at Hao. "I'm so happy you came tonight," he said. "It would've been so wrong to celebrate without you. It's all thanks to you." Hao's face was on fire, he felt it burn.

"It's because you're a talented group," he replied. Hanbin laughed. He sounded like he'd drunk quite a lot. He also looked like it, but he was handling it with grace. Hao just hoped his head wouldn't kill him the next day.

"Hao," Hanbin said. "I'm glad it's you." What the hell.

He blinked quite a few times. "You're drunk, Hanbin-ah," he whispered.

"I know," he replied, with a smile. "I like this feeling," he added. "Will hate it tomorrow," Hao laughed, caught by surprise.

"I'm glad I came, too," he finally said. "I like your friends, and I like that you like mine." It was true, anyway, so

he might as well say it. “I just hope we’ll have good news soon, too.”

Hanbin nodded, and it felt like he’d never taken his eyes away from Hao. God, Hao would have to do such a great job at relegating all the memories about this conversation to the farthest corner of his mind. The way Hanbin could look at him, without even knowing what he was doing, had the potential of becoming the kind of memory that comes to mind at the worst time ever. “I hope so too,” Hanbin said, with a smile that made his cheeks rounder. “Hyung-”

“Hanbin hyung,” Matthew’s voice cut him off. “Jiwoong hyung is about to throw up, let’s go home.” Hao turned to see Matthew holding Jiwoong’s wonky figure from under his arm. Gunwook hurried to them, catching their leader from the other side. They heard him laugh.

“Go,” Hao said. “I’ll text you.” Hanbin’s smile was going to take the leading role in Hao’s subconscious thoughts, no matter how hard he fought, he already knew.

“Sleep well,” Hanbin said. Hao wouldn’t. He probably wouldn’t sleep at all.

janghao

> Whenever you’re free, no matter the time of day, I have to call you.

Kuanjuiii

> I sense some desperation on your side bestie

janghao

> Yeah.

> It’s the alcohol, I’m sure.

Kuanjuiii

> We all say that.

> And then it’s not

> So, what did you do? You kissed him or smth?

janghao

> NO.

> Nothing of the sort.

Kuanjuiii

> Boring.

> I won’t clear my schedule for boring Hao’s boring love life.

janghao

> You do you.

It was raining. Hanbin was trying to focus on an assignment he had to turn in a few days later. He wasn’t really doing his best, this time. There was an unanswered email opened on a different tab on his laptop, and it kinda stressed him out. Just like the first time, the CEO herself had emailed him telling him to please join her for a meeting of personal nature. It would have sounded ominous, but this time he had gotten — almost in real time — a screenshot from Hao, with a similar message from his company. So, it was just another meeting about the two of them and their ongoing relationship scam. It was supposed to be easy. All of this was supposed to be easy, replying to the CEO, telling her he was available for the meeting, promising that he and Hao were doing fine and trying their best, adding that they would continue as long as it was necessary. At least, he would. Hao, though? He hoped he was in for the long game, too, because this was, supposedly, where it got good. Except he didn’t want to do a report of their mission to their CEOs, he didn’t want to hear them discussing their next steps just like they discussed all other business projects. He thought about it too often, what it would’ve been like to meet Hao outside their agencies. He liked talking to him, he liked how Hao was good at listening to him, how he also replied with the same energy every time. He liked the way

Hao never acted like it was too much of an effort being outside with Hanbin, like maybe he kinda liked being with Hanbin too. He liked the way Hao was honest and open, even if they'd been pushed together by their bosses. He just wished he'd found it all out without this stupid plan in the way. He just wished he'd met him on his own, talked to him the first time on his own. But this wasn't a very productive line of thought, was it?

"Hyung," Hanbin turned to the door to see Matthew letting himself in and closing it behind his back. "Hyung, are you worried?"

He sighed. When wasn't he worried about something or other, lately? "What for?" Matthew sat at the other end of Hanbin's bed. He crossed his legs on the mattress.

"Don't know," Matthew shrugged. "I just *feel* that you're worried," Hanbin raised his eyebrows. "Just joking, Jiwoong hyung was emailed too, CC-ed, how do you say it? When you get the same email other people get but it's not really for you?"

"Oh," Hanbin guessed they'd put two and two together, too. It was easy to understand, it was easy to also deduce he would be agitated, then. "I'm fine," he said. "Hao got the same email, so they'll just want an update or something."

Matthew kept silent for a few seconds. He looked lost in thought. When he looked like this, Hanbin usually asked him what he was thinking, because maybe he just got stuck on translating his thoughts into Korean, despite all the years spent here. Or maybe there was something about his own feelings — complex on their own — that he wasn't good at putting into words. Now, though, he didn't break the silence. "Hyung," he started again. "You're sure you want to keep the charade up? Isn't it a bit too unfair to you to spend so much time dating someone you don't want to date and then hope that it will somehow benefit all of us and—"

"It's okay," Hanbin cut him off. "I *know* it'll benefit all of us. We're preparing for a comeback after, what, almost two years? And they're recording, already, so it's good. It's paying off." Matthew didn't look convinced. "I don't mind spending time with Hao hyung, either."

"It's not just *spending time*, though, is it?" Why did Matthew have to make it harder than it was? "You're going to be interviewed about him soon. You're going to be believably in love with him, and any other relationship in your life will be influenced by this one, you know, right?"

So, what was he supposed to do? To ditch everything right now? Just before it got to the point they'd been aiming for from the start? Because, for now, it was just foreign articles and stupid reddit posts. But it was all speculation, and they needed to *get caught*. They needed to be out, they needed to have people see them together and understand at a glance that they were *together*, not just in the same place. Because that was the scandal they'd been aiming for. Not the fans, the media. "Honestly, I will do anything for us to be invited to one year-end show, Matthew. *Anything*. To be on those stages, I would sell my soul, possibly."

"Isn't that what you're doing, in a way?" Matthew sounded bitter. There was no reason for him to be upset, though, in Hanbin's mind.

He took a breath. "I'm just going out with a guy, come on," he leveled his voice. "Why are you stressed about this, be honest."

Matthew looked away. Hanbin sighed. He didn't need this, honestly. He didn't need his best friend to be closing up on him. Matthew looked back to him, he looked determined. "I think this situation has the potential to hurt you, in the long run. Because you're *you*, and you get attached to people, and you're doing this for us and not for yourself, and this will stop you from safeguarding yourself. And when the deal will end, you'll be left without someone you'll have come to lean on. And—"

"Hey," he said. And he set his laptop away, to shift himself closer to Matthew. "Hey. Don't be such a pessimist, okay?" Matthew nodded weakly. "It's going to be okay. Me and Hao will be friends, all throughout this thing, and no one will be hurt. I promise."

Matthew kept nodding. Hanbin closed his eyes for one long second. He hugged Matthew, hooking his head over his shoulder. Matthew's arms held him close. "It's just," Matthew said against his shoulder. "We all get worried, because it's not like we can help you."

Hanbin just patted his back. "Well, actually, you're already helping," he said. "All of you are."

Hanbin didn't mind that his friends worried about his meeting with the CEO; he didn't mind that they tried to be on his side in this endeavor. However, he didn't really know how to ease their worry, simply because he didn't think they needed to worry that much. What was the worst thing that could happen, realistically? That a few newspapers bashed him and Hao for their supposed relationship? Bad publicity is still publicity, and all that. And it wasn't like they

were doing anything wrong, either, in theory. They wouldn't slander a PR couple, if it was made of a man and a woman, so if they ended up doing it with him and Hao it was just because of the other issue. Not because they were faking. He took a deep breath as he fixed the collar of his shirt beneath his sweatshirt, before entering the meeting room where Dr. Ji was already waiting for him.

He opened the door to find Hao sitting alongside his boss, Mr. Lee, and Dr. Ji with a bright pink dress, with an empty chair on her side. He bowed to them, and he sat down. It felt a bit weird, not sitting on Hao's side but across from him. It felt like they were at the beginning again, like the very first time they'd met with these very same people.

"Hi," Hao said, and his smile was warm, but he looked nervous. Hanbin tried to smile back. Maybe he failed.

"I hear you're preparing for a comeback," Mr. Lee said, towards Hanbin. He nodded, and he wanted to say that he'd been late because their choreography practice had run longer than it should have, and then Jiwoong had wanted to check more things out with him and-

"Yes," Dr. Ji answered for him. "It's just a pre-release song, though, to reintroduce them on the stage. They're going to attend some weekly music shows and all but it's not a full album, yet."

"It's wise," Mr. Lee looked pleased. "Keep them ready for recording, though, because if you're lucky you won't need much time," he sounded over enthusiastic. Hao, on his side, wasn't looking at him as he spoke. He was observing Hanbin, he could feel his eyes on him.

"And you're doing a mini, Lee-sajangnim?" Hanbin cut in. He knew it from Hao. He knew they were shooting the video these days, and he knew they'd undergone a few photoshoots already. He'd been flooded with a lot of photos from the various sets.

"Yes," Mr. Lee replied. "We're trying to get your two groups to promote at the same time," he added. "It'll give the two of you some more screen time together, possibly."

Hanbin's mouth was dry, he didn't know what to say. Going on TV with Hao? Trying to feed the fire of internet-based speculation through those ten-seconds interviews? It felt like something he wouldn't know how to play.

"I have a question," Hao's voice was quiet as usual, decisive, too. He had this way of talking when he was with people who had authority over him, that made him look like he had even more authority. Hanbin had always found it to be something admirable. "Are we to act as if we just like each other, or is it to be implied that there's something running deeper already?"

Hanbin wanted to be elsewhere, if he was honest. He didn't want to be looking at Hao's serious expression as he calculated just which kind of smile would work better on camera. He wanted to just- to just skip to the next part of the day, when they would be going for bingsu and they would pretend they hadn't just been in a meeting about their private lives.

"Oh," Dr. Ji was thinking about it, tapping her fingers on the top of the dark wood table. "It's already been a couple months since that first dance challenge together," it had been a month and three weeks. Hanbin didn't say it. "So, I think by the time you'll be promoting on TV we should be saying that you're dating. Of course, both companies would still deny it, because it would be early and realistically we wouldn't be too happy about it, but yes, sure. On TV, act like you're already dating."

"We'll try to get some journalists on your heels, too. So be ready to have company on your outings," Mr. Lee said, very happily.

Hao was nodding, polite. Hanbin took a silent breath, through his nose. It was going to be alright. It was Hao, he trusted him. He would have his back. He wouldn't leave him to embarrass himself on his own. "Sure," he said, trying to smile.

Stars Hanbin and Aw4ke Hao's recent date stirs up fan debate

After making headlines for the many Instagram stories and posts about the other, the two idols were seen together again this weekend. There was no apparent occasion, no birthdays and no events to attend, but the two still had ice-cream in a park, and spent a few hours together, according to both boys' social media posts and the comments Hanbin made in a recent live stream.

"If I've been out with Hao hyung recently?" he replied to one comment. "Ah, yes, we met the other day. We went for a walk, it was a nice day." He didn't really go into detail, but he acknowledged their bond later on, when someone else asked about his relations outside his group members. "I have many friends," he stated. "But there's someone I see

way more often than all the others. I can talk to him really well. I think we're very similar and match well."

Both groups are set to have new releases within the next month.

user459585 commented:

atp it's pretty clear that there's something going on

"we match well" is a weird thing to say about someone who's just your friend

rina980308 commented:

i hope they'll feel comfortable sharing their future dates with us too. i like seeing them enjoying each other's company. they're clearly a good pair.

user104801 commented:

hao also talked about the date in his live today! he said that hanbin bought the ice cream for him, and he wasn't fast enough to pay for him, instead. then he said that when he sees him again he'll pay. and he was live with gyu, and he said that at this rate they'll both go bankrupt. and hao said that he'll have to become richer, then, so he can keep going out with hanbin.

user876153 commented:

who cares if they're dating tho, y'all obsess over this stuff for what?

user998764 commented :

@ user876153 i just think that it's a bit of a breath of fresh air to see someone address their dates so naturally. it's refreshing bc they obviously care about each other and they just see each other and share it with the fans, without hiding it or ignoring it when people ask about it.

user876153 commented:

@ user998764 but they're not doing anything worth hiding??? like? you can just go get ice cream with your friend and it's not like it's a whole statement come on

user998764 commented :

@ user876153 okay but they're clearly not friends. they're dating.

user876153 commented:

@ user998764 says who? they're just addressing they're seeing the other person, that doesn't mean they're dating. they might actually be just friends.

user998764 commented :

@ user87615 yeah right. the constant date-posting is so friendly-like! good luck with your denial!

user876153 commented:

@ user998764 and good luck with your delusion!!

Zhang Hao :D

> *Unexpectedly finished shooting sooner than we thought!*

> *I feel like it's Christmas or something*

hanbinsung

> *Amazingggg*

> *Wanna hang out?*

Zhang Hao :D

> *Yes.*

hanbinsung

> *kay i'll get changed*
> *Any ideas what to do?*

Zhang Hao :D

> *Mmmmh*
> *No cinema pls.*

hanbinsung

> *Hyung I'm down for everything*

Zhang Hao :D

> *Cute.*
> *Karaoke?*

Hanbin had no idea how they were going to get up and go to rehearsals in the morning. It wasn't him, specifically, he'd driven his car to the noraebang, so he hadn't drunk as much as the others. It was mainly Matthew, who kept holding the microphone hostage and didn't let anyone sing alone, and Taerae, who was slouching on the small couch with his eyes closed but he kept humming all the songs even when he didn't know the words. He also had no idea how he'd found himself with the two of them, when he'd just planned to go out with Hao. Well, planned. He'd just changed into some better pants and a cleaner sweater, grabbed the keys to his car and tried to leave. Matthew and Taerae had ambushed him as he was opening the door.

"Sneaking out?" Matthew had asked, his smile mischievous.

"No," Hanbin had replied. "I'm *going* out," he'd said. "It's different."

"Where? With whom? What time do you plan to be back?" Taerae couldn't even keep his face straight. Hanbin had caved in, it'd taken him less than a minute to just tell them to join him, it wasn't like they would ruin his evening. Or so he thought.

Because when Hao had showed up, he was alone, and he was still wearing some make up from the photoshoot he'd attended and he was clearly not expecting to see Matthew and Taerae, too. His face fell for a second, Hanbin noticed.

"They wanted to come, too," he said. He should have told them no, thinking back on it. Maybe he should have drawn a better line.

"You'd be a terrible father," was Hao's only answer. And it took Hanbin by surprise, so much so that he needed a few seconds to come up with something to say.

"They-" he tried. Hao's eyes thinned, as he started laughing. "Listen, I have trouble saying no, okay." Hao laughed his full laughter. It was beautiful, when he laughed like this, it sounded truly like he was happy. Hanbin liked the sound.

"You're fun to tease," Hao said, before he moved on to greet the others. "You're cute," Hao added, and he walked on, to hug Matthew and Taerae loosely. Hanbin felt his brain fry. It was the second time in, what, an hour that Hao called him cute. And it should be okay, it shouldn't send him into a shock that threatened to alter the functioning of his neurons. But here he was, as his ears were getting warmer and surely redder, stuck in the lobby of a brightly lit noraebang. *Cute*. Was he cute? What did he do to be called cute? Was it something people normally said to each other? Jiwoong kinda called everyone cute, but this wasn't Jiwoong. This was Hao. Hao, who was now looking at him like Hanbin was some sort of alien.

"Yes, hyung?" Hanbin asked, trying to gain back some composure. What the fuck was wrong with him. It was just a word, something people say all the time.

"Taerae's gone to get the room," he explained. Just how long had Hanbin stood still while processing the fact someone had called him cute? Humiliating.

"Let's go," Hanbin said. He refused to say anything else. If Hao thought he was weird, he didn't say.

Matthew was the first one to suggest ordering drinks. Hanbin didn't think it was a good idea, they had to get up early the next day. But they just elected to not listen to him, and maybe he stopped protesting when he realized that Hao had agreed to it. Hadn't he already disappointed him enough by inviting the others? He should just let him drink if he wanted.

Matthew took the glass away from Hanbin with a wide smile. "You're driving," he reminded him. "No drinking for the driver," he was on the verge of drunkenness. He got up and took the mic back, taking it out of Taerae's hand with a strong grip.

"Hanbin-ah," Hao slid closer to him on the fake-leather couch. "They're good at singing," Hao said, and maybe he was just up for compliments tonight. Maybe that was all there was to it. Hanbin smiled at him. He nodded. "Hanbin-ah," Hao repeated.

"Yes?"

"Would you still want to be my friend if we'd met differently?" What? Out of the blue? Hao wasn't even drunk, he hadn't had that much to drink, his eyes were still sober. Hanbin felt his chest get tighter. "Isn't it a hassle to go out with me that often?"

"What's wrong?" Hanbin asked, immediately. Hao leaned his head against the wall behind him. There was a hint of sadness in the shape of his mouth. Hanbin didn't like this. It was dumb. What right could he have to like or dislike someone else's emotions?

"Just answer," he looked away.

"I honestly wish we'd met in a different way," Hanbin confessed. He'd never said it aloud. Taerae's desperate yell as *You Were Beautiful* was cut off by Matthew picking something much more hip-hop half covered his voice. "I mean," he tried again. "I wish we could have met on our own. I would have still wanted to be your friend," he was quick to say. "I like talking to you."

"I only had one friend," Hao said. "And now he's left," he sounded a bit too airy. "And suddenly I find myself texting to you to just hang out when I'm tired like I did when he was here, and sometimes it feels like I'm betraying him. And sometimes it feels like I'm betraying you, because you're not really supposed to be my new best friend, Hanbin. You're supposed to look good on my side on TV, while the two of us feed some twisted narrative to get some attention."

"I do like hanging out with you," Hanbin kinda cut him off. Hao's eyes focused back on him. He blinked a few times, as if he just realized what he was saying. "I don't know about your friend, but, for what it's worth, you're welcome to ask me to hang out whenever you want." Hao sighed, shaking his head. Hanbin leaned his head against the wall too, mirroring his pose. "Why don't you tell me about your friend? What's he doing now?"

Taerae and Matthew went through the equivalent of a whole concert setlist, and then Hao finished talking to Hanbin and got up to get the mic from Matthew. Hanbin didn't join them. Not yet. There was a lot in his head. Hao was lonely, it hurt him more than it hurt Hao. If he could bring this boy back from Taiwan, Hanbin would do it in a split second. But, unfortunately, the only thing he could do was sit there and listen to Hao's emotional voice as he told him about all the times he'd wanted someone to yell about the stress of leading his group. And he had: no one. Hao's family was also far away, and they weren't exactly happy about how his career had turned out either. *I'm sorry*, Hao had concluded. *I'm just troublesome. I wish I could be better.*

"Hyung, come sing with us," Taerae beckoned him to go. "We miss you," he was smiling so brightly, the reason why Hanbin had been unable to say no earlier that night. Now, though, he was only looking at Hao. Hao met his eyes, and he smiled, not as brightly, but it was all Hanbin needed to get up.

"Play something upbeat," he said, getting up. "Enough being sad."

Matthew ended up falling asleep with his head on the table, passed out after who knows how many drinks. Their managers would kill them tomorrow. But they were all adults, and he didn't have to babysit anyone, actually. Hao started another song. It was some ballad in Chinese Hanbin didn't know. So he stepped back, watching as Hao did his thing. He could listen to him sing all night, he realized. He liked this much better than his sad face from earlier. Now, Hao was in his element, he became one with the music. He looked like he should sing forever, like he was born to do it, like it was the only place he should ever be, under the spotlight with a microphone in his hand. Hanbin took a video of this. He told himself he would just use it to check out the song later, the translation, the meaning. But he wasn't good at lying to himself.

“Hao hyung,” it was almost 3AM, they’d been singing and drinking for hours. Hao’s cheeks were red from alcohol now, Hanbin had lost his only sober companion too. “Are you feeling better now?”

Hao’s smile grew to its full brightness. “I’m feeling amazing,” he said. “Bin-ah,” Hanbin looked at him, he had no choice. The gravity of his stare only ever led back to him. “Hanbin-ah, you’re a good person,” Hao said. “I think the girl who marries you will be lucky.”

Hanbin laughed, shaking his head. “What girl?” He watched Hao struggle with his reply for a few seconds, then he just shook his head once more. “Hyung,” he thought that, maybe, if Hao had told him so many things, he could tell him too. “Hyung, you can’t believe I like girls, come on. You know me, by now.”

Hao’s eyes went wide. Then he gaped. Then he leaned a bit away from Hanbin. “I’m too drunk for this,” he said. Hanbin laughed. “But I’ll remember to bring it up later.”

“Sure,” Hanbin replied. “Whenever you want.”

“Can you drive me home, too?” Hao stuttered, as if he’d just realized that he still needed to get home. “Hanbin,” again, why did he like to call his name that much. “Hanbin-ah, please, let’s go home.”

Hao should just never leave his home again. It looked like the perfect solution, didn’t it? This way, he wouldn’t have to face anyone. Not his manager, Yunho, who was going to kill him for coming back home at 4AM without checking with the company beforehand. Not his members, who would ask seven thousand questions about where he’d run off immediately after the photographer told them they were done. Most importantly, not Hanbin. If he thought about Hanbin, it was like his mind shut off, flashing red warnings and blaring emergency sirens. There was a fog around last night and Hanbin, and it was becoming harder and harder to distinguish between what had really happened and what had only been a figment of his own imagination.

He remembered everything clearly up until Hanbin and him had sung some song from a musical. Then, it became harder to understand whether the things he remembered had taken place at the noraebang or in his own fantasy. Him asking Hanbin — begging him — to drive him home looked real enough, although humiliating. But Hanbin getting the seatbelt for him, sitting him in the passenger’s seat? Was it true? Was it the same dream in which he’d imagined that Hanbin would just kiss him, maybe in his car, just before dropping him off, or maybe just behind the door on the street. That had to be a dream. Because why would Hanbin kiss him in real life? As far as dreams go, however, it was too real. It felt too accurate. A painful reminder that when he looked at Hanbin, he looked really close. He looked with some intent that wasn’t quite right. Fuck. *Fuck*. In the dream, Hanbin’s mouth was pressing against his own as if Hanbin, too, was crazy with desire, as if he’d been the one who’d dreamt about this, not the other way around. In the dream, Hanbin’s lips touched his cheeks, and his jaw, and they whispered that he’d been wanting this forever. In the dream, Hao smiled against his lips, kissing him back, and he told him that he would never let him go. In the real world, this hadn’t happened. Of course. So how was he going to see him again? To talk to him as if he hadn’t been forced to realize that, deep down, he wanted Hanbin. And why was it? In the end it was such a stupid reason, Hao’s intelligence should feel insulted by this. Hanbin was just a good person. Such a good person, all around, that Hao couldn’t help but want him for himself.

“I want to see your boy,” Kuanjui said over Facetime. It had been him who’d called Hao, because Hao would have liked to keep his isolation from humanity.

“Not my boy,” Hao made clear. He needed to make it clear to his own subconscious more than to Kuanjui. “And you’ve seen him in photos and videos, we’ve been through this.”

“You *cunt*,” he swore. “I want to see him like I see you now, like, Face Time me when you’re with him, next time.” Yeah, sure. After last night? Never happening.

“No,” he said, simply. Kuanjui just stared at him. “What?”

“Something’s happened. What is it?” Hao missed him, but he didn’t miss the way he could read him with no effort.

“He’s gay, Jui.” He said. And there it was, the thing that had been eating at him the most. “He’s gay. And this means that it’s a fucking slippery slope, because we’re supposed to pretend. And I’m fucking good at pretending, but he’s nice. And he’s fun. And he’s *gay*. And this means that the whole mental construct I’d built for myself in the last seven weeks is falling apart.”

“Was your whole strategy: you have too much dignity to fall for a straight dude?” He sounded incredulous. It was, admittedly, a very bad strategy.

“Basically, yes,” Hao said. “That, and the fact that it’s something we’re doing for work.”

“What’s wrong if you like him for real?” Kuanjui asked it with a striking degree of sincerity.

“That we’re about to get the paparazzi onto us, according to the CEO,” Hao said. “And I’d like to keep control on what’s happening inside my head if I’m gonna be printed in a newspaper.”

“Your newspapers are all online,” Kuanjui replied. Hao hung up the call.

The truth was, he couldn’t complicate things. If they wanted the commercial plan to work, they had to be level-headed. Love — not that this was love, it was just him finding a guy hot and discovering he was also into men — was everything but level-headed. It opened up to too many complications. And they needed to avoid everything that would ruin their plan. So, Hao looked at himself in the mirror, at the dark circles under his eyes, at the untidy mop of hair on the top of his head. And he promised himself that Sung Hanbin, no matter how brightly he could smile at him, no matter how nicely he would listen to him, Sung Hanbin wouldn’t get to send him spiraling in the paranoia that would come along with feelings. Hao would develop feelings, alright, it looked inevitable. But he would just squeeze them out of himself and leave them out to dry until their deal was done. If they managed to survive the duration of their deal, then he would revise his stance.

Sung Han Bin

> *Hyung! You okay?*

> *Last night you kinda blacked out in the car.*

janghao

> *Hey, thanks. I’m good!*

> *Your friends?*

Sung Han Bin

> *lol*

> *manager Seokjae wanted to kill them!*

janghao

> *You’re not good at taking care of your dongsaengs*

Sung Han Bin

> *That’s true.*

> *We’re recording today, I should get ready.*

> *Let’s talk later?*

janghao

> *Fighting for the recording!!*

> *Sure.*

> *I have a free day today.*

> *Listen, Hanbin*

> *I’ll text the CEOs, but it’s time we get the news to talk about us again*

Sung Han Bin

> *I’m back.*

> *Huh. Sure. Did you have something in mind?*

janghao

> *Do you trust me?*

Sung Han Bin

- > *Yep!*
- > *Gotta go again oh god*
- > *Let me know, I'm still up for anything.*
- > *Ah, one last thing.*
- > *Here's you singing last night <3*
- > *[Sung Han Bin sent a video]*

Gunwook was trying to explain the rules to a table game for the third time, Hanbin was more than sure that they were easy enough to understand, so why the hell had Matthew asked to explain them again? “No, but I’ve got this,” Jiwoong said, hyper focused on the cardboard set in the middle of their (small) living room. “But I don’t get why-”

“Let’s just play and we’ll see what happens,” Taerae offered, his voice conciliatory but his eyes a tiny bit crazy. “Because we’ve been reading the rules for twenty minutes and tomorrow morning I want to go to class and I kinda need some sleep, you know?”

“We can’t play if the rules aren’t clear to everyone,” Gunwook protested, a slight frown on his forehead. “Hyung,” he turned to Hanbin, a bit pleading. “Aren’t I right?”

Hanbin would’ve liked not to have to say anything, but, suddenly, five pairs of eyes were on him and he *had* to say something. “Huh,” he said. “Don’t you also have class in the morning?” He asked Gunwook. He watched him sag his shoulders in defeat. “I’m sorry,” he added in the end. “I think we should just start the game.” Taerae was the first to distribute the small figurines designed to represent them and set the rest of the stuff up.

“You really have issues saying no to them,” Hao commented, low enough for only Hanbin to hear. His machiavellian plan to attract the press had somehow turned into an improvised game night with all of Hanbin’s members, only because they were all home that night. Unsurprising, given it was a random Tuesday and they were *not* famous, busy people. Yet.

Hanbin threw him a dirty look. As dirty as he managed to, anyway, because he was right, of course. Hanbin had never been able to impose himself among them, which was why they always turned to him whenever there was some makeshift conflict to be solved. “Can you at least pretend you’re not on their side?” He whispered back.

Hao smiled a bit, and he held his gaze for a long second. “No,” he said, still smiling. He settled a bit better against the back of the couch. “Won’t you pass me my goals card, Bin-ah?” Hanbin was tempted to say no, in the same manner Hao’d just done, same tone and everything. He passed him the card, without looking him in the eyes. Hao’s laugh was quiet. “Thank you, honey.” Hanbin felt his cheeks flare up. What was this? Was Hao dead set on embarrassing in front of the others? Was this somehow part of the plan to get the press on their back?

“Yah,” he protested. “I’ll stop being nice to you.” Hao raised his eyebrows, clearly disbelieving. “I mean it.”

“Whenever you’re done with *this*,” Taerae said, making Hanbin turn back to him in a flash. “We’ll start the game.” He said. Somehow, while Hanbin was busy being bullied by Hao, Taerae had decided Gunwook would be the first to cast the dice. Hanbin guessed it was because he wanted to make up for the way he’d imposed they started playing, but also because Taerae was just as weak to Gunwook’s childish charm as the rest of them was. It didn’t take long before they were all engrossed in the game, making up some of the rules as they went on, which had Gunwook in distress and Hao in stitches with laughter.

“Hyung,” Matthew’s voice was laced with laughter. Hanbin turned to him, expecting him to be talking to him. “Hao hyung,” he clarified, leaning forward from his seat, plastered against Jiwoong. “Stop pretending you don’t know the rules in order to cheat,” he was smiling, but he was also serious, in that half-threatening way Matthew always had, where he looked simultaneously harmless and the most dangerous person ever.

“I’m not cheating,” Hao gasped. “I’m an honest kid,” he looked at Hanbin, nodding, as if it would make Hanbin automatically agree. Hanbin sat back, with a shrug. Hao threw him a shocked look. “I don’t like this untrusting atmosphere, I won’t lie,” Hao went on. “I am *not* cheating, I just suck at playing games.”

“But you’re winning,” Hanbin pointed out. Gunwook’s laughter made them all burst into laughter, too.

“Oh, come on,” Hao tried protesting, failing to hold back laughter.

“Look at the betrayal,” Jiwoong commented, lightly. He was drinking cola from a can, and Hanbin thought that he, too, deserved some cold drink. If only for an excuse to get out of the room for a few seconds. He got up, pointing in the

kitchen's direction, and he reached the fridge, opening it and staring at it for way too long. There was nothing *objectively* wrong with how the night was progressing, everyone was having fun, *he* was having fun. But, at the same time, it was all different, all not so right. Hao fit in their dynamic a bit too well. It wasn't supposed to be a bad thing, and it wasn't. It made it easier, if anything, having to have him around for a while longer yet. But Hanbin couldn't shake the nervousness it still created in him, having Hao talk to these people who knew all his secrets, all the horrible sides to him. And what if Hao went back home knowing too much about Hanbin's least likable parts? What if he read Hanbin's bickering with Matthew or Taerae as something heavy to be around?

"You trying to set a record for highest electricity bill?" Hao's voice, right behind him, forced him to get out of his reverie. He fished out two cans of Zero Cola, handing him one.

"Hyung," he said. And he felt like this was the first time he was actually looking at Hao's face the whole night. He looked a bit tired, but his eyes were as bright as always, and Hanbin had gotten a bit too used to finding their shape really pretty. "Hyung, are you having fun?"

Hao smiled, relaxedly. There were some strands of hair falling in his eyes, and the hoodie he had on looked maybe too warm for the season, but it gave off the impression that he was at the highest level of comfort he could be. They were both barefoot, and, like this, it was evident that Hao had a couple centimeters over Hanbin, in height. "Of course, I am," he said. "Thank you for the Cola," he added. Hanbin didn't know why it felt wrong for him to just go back to playing with the others.

"I know you're cheating at the game, by the way," Hanbin said, while he let Hao stay back in the kitchen. "You're too clever not to have understood the rules."

Hao laughed hard, "What can I say," he retorted, and he caught up with Hanbin. "I always win," he sounded a bit breathless. "Better get used to it."

"I'm not going to rat you out," Hanbin just said. "But I won't defend you, either."

"Terrible boyfriend, I got myself," Hao's smile wasn't lost on Hanbin, even if he immediately turned away to join the others, who were once again hunched over the rules booklet, with Gunwook protesting against something Matthew was saying, both of them too close to raising their voice over such a stupid matter.

The night progressed, and it saw Hao as the winner, after all. After a few minutes of protests, Gunwook elected to get ready for bed, and so did Matthew. Hao and Jiwoong were having a conversation, both of them sitting on the couch and animatedly sharing some information about something Hanbin hadn't quite caught. It had to do with passports, at least at the beginning. But now Hao was mentioning his Chinese hometown, and Jiwoong was looking something up on his phone and trying to say something about someone whom he knew.

"Now, I don't want to be the one who says it," Taerae brought a couple glasses to Hanbin, who was washing up some stuff.

"But?"

"But here I am, about to say it," Taerae leaned a bit against the kitchen counter. Hanbin looked at him, trying to adopt an expression suitable for someone who wanted to really listen to someone else. Even though it wasn't the case. Not at all. "I'm all for making friends, and I'm all for being friends with Hao hyung, especially because of the PR thing and all."

"But?" Hanbin repeated. He watched as Taerae took a deep, deep breath.

"But, please, *please*, take care of yourself? Like, it's all fun and games, but this situation is about to become well-known to a lot more people, and you'll believe he's the only one who can understand you. And you'll look out for him more than you look out for yourself, because I know you. And, I know you're doing this for us. But you haven't dated anyone in all this time I've known you," Hanbin frowned. What did it have to do with the situation at hand? "Just. *Just*. Try to stay as rational as you can, okay? Unless you decide you will just--"

"What are you even hinting at?" Hanbin needed a diagram of whatever overly-complicated situation Taerae was coming up with.

Taerae sighed. "Don't be dumb, it's the only thing I'm asking you. I know you always have space for everyone in your heart, but this time try to protect yourself a little, too, okay?" He walked away before Hanbin could even begin to formulate any answer. "I'm going to sleep."

"Good night, Tae," he could only say. He would try to dissect his words later, when he would go to sleep too. Now, though, he moved back to the couch with Hao and Jiwoong.

Hao was still on that couch two hours later, and not just because his weird press plan was still in motion, but because he and Hanbin had struck up a conversation that might as well see them still up at daybreak. Hanbin had a way of stitching words together that was mesmerizing. Hao could listen to him forever. “And what was your high school like, then?” He found himself asking. Hanbin laughed quietly in front of him, and Hao knew that he’d promised himself he wouldn’t let himself fall for him, but it was fucking hard.

“I was completely different from now, when I was in high school,” Hanbin said. “You wouldn’t have looked at me twice.”

Bold statement, given how Hao couldn’t look away from him at any given time, now. “Do you think I only care about how people look?” He still said. “I have never once liked someone just because he was pretty. Especially in this job, it’s too easy to find good-looking people.”

Hanbin’s eyes were focused on him and his answer. He let out another soft laugh. “Trust me, hyung,” he repeated. “Anyway, high school was like any other high school. I managed to graduate nicely, even with all the dance and singing classes, and I thought I would be immensely famous as soon as I graduated.” Hao laughed, too. “You know, before Matthew moved here from Canada, me and Taerae were the only trainees in this company more or less the same age. And we became friends soon,” they were still very close. It showed. “Can I tell you something that is super secret?”

Hao blinked. “Naturally,” he said.

“In junior year, in high school,” Hanbin started. “A girl from my class gave me chocolate for Valentine’s day.” He looked away. “I spent the whole night, I swear the *whole* night, crying with Taerae and Jiwoong hyung and Matt, too, because I didn’t know how to reject her and I didn’t want to accept her gift if I wasn’t going to return it, and I didn’t want people to call me names for turning a girl down.”

“How hard it must have been, to be pursued by people,” Hao said, with no bite. He’d turned down a fair share of people in school. He didn’t care about that, he had goals to achieve. And now, look at him, trying not to derail his own goal because he kinda cared too much about someone. Life surely is ironic.

Hanbin laughed, again. “I was inconsolable. And Jiwoong hyung had no idea what to tell me, and Taerae just exploded after a while, and he told me that if I cared that much about what people thought of me I should just leave the company and change career. It was such a shock?” Hao had brought a hand in front of his mouth to hide his surprised expression. “But he was right, in a way.”

“So what did you do?” Hao was curious.

“Well, I talked to the girl and told her I didn’t like her like that. And then the next night I went to Taerae and told him I was just not into girls, in general. And he said, and I quote: wasn’t it clear? And I was so offended that I didn’t talk to him for a week.”

Hao scratched his head. “How are you two still friends?” He was wondering about it for real. “And the others? Did you-”

“Well, Matthew’s from overseas. He made it quite easy for me. He’s borderline blunt,” Hao could see it. “Jiwoong hyung, huh. He kinda asked everyone their dating history when the lineup was decided. He said he needed to know, because he was the leader. Truth was, he’s a gossip.” Hao burst out in laughter again. “And Wookie,” Hanbin shrugged. “Wookie was so young, he grew up with us. He used to take things at face value, when they came from me or Jiwoong hyung. He’s a sweet kid, he’s got a lot of love to give.”

“You’ve got like a second family around you,” Hao commented. They all loved each other in a way that was a bit strange for him to see in his own life. Sure, the others loved him dearly. But he himself? Did he have the same level of adoration for Gyuvin or Quanrui or Seungeon? Hanbin was looking at him with his whole attention. Hao felt a bit too exposed. “I tried not making a big deal of the thing, when I moved in with the others. I just put it into the open, but I didn’t mean for it to become a whole topic. Of course, Gyuvin came home the following day with a whole speech about how differences make us stronger, and we should all be accepting. It was embarrassing. He wouldn’t stop crying.”

“Why would he be crying?” Hanbin looked perplexed. He had every right to, it had been horrifying to witness this scene.

“Because he’s Gyuvin,” Hao could only reply. “He’s a mess of a person.” Hanbin’s eyes went glossy with the tears his laughter brought to him. He half snorted, while laughing, and Hao wished he could stop the time at this moment. He didn’t want to go home, he wanted to stay here, sharing the most embarrassing stories about the years gone by, he wanted to only exist in the comfort of this conversation, simultaneously stupid and fundamental.

Clearly, his phone had to start vibrating right then. “Oh,” he said, reading the text. “He’s there.”

Hanbin stretched his arms above his head, with a yawn. “Time to put on the show.”

5stars Hanbin and Aw4ke Hao dating?

A news outlet put out photos this morning, portraying the two idols hugging in front of 5stars dorm at night. The photos show the two getting out of the front door, standing in close distance from each other, and then — clearly — hugging goodbye. Neither idol's agency has addressed the relationship between the two, yet, although they've been known to be seeing each other on multiple occasions. Aw4ke's new album should be released this month, while 5star's single release has already hit the virtual shelves. Neither idol has previously come out as gay, but it is noticeable how neither's had known girlfriends before this. Will this spur at least some comments on this matter?

jjayy1234 commented:

how convenient that they've been paparazzi-ed right when they're both having a comeback after a century of hiatus

aaabbbccc01 commented:

i don't understand how these paparazzi always manage to catch these people doing the most but never showing their faces properly. the two in the photo could very well be my aunt and her neighbor for what we can see of them

5starsontop commented:

*even if that's hanbin, that's his life and we shouldn't give a sh*t*

aw4kennnn commented:

i mean, the agencies have very little left to confirm or deny. they've been hanging out for months, now. what are they supposed to do? stop hao from going to visit his bff's house at night? they should worry about promoting this comeback, rather.

5shiningstars commented:

they're so cute!!!! i'm really happy they have each other even if people are hating on them!!!

4sleepnotawake commented:

*a bit disappointed that hao would let himself be caught doing these things. like, you can date whoever you want, but why do you have to be caught and posted on the news? surely, you can hug and kiss your untalented boyfriend behind closed doors and come out of his building on your own. this is just asking for trouble.
it's not like they're in a country that will accept them, either. so they're just being careless.*

ireonaimaw4ke! commented:

@4sleepnotawake girl what the fuck u could keep the thinkpiece in your drafts

hythwy673 commented:

disgusting all around. if these are the role models we're supposed to have, count me out.

ireonaimaw4ke! commented:

@hythwy673 bye then.

ireonaimaw4ke! commented:

*god, people can be so horrible. i hope they will just shove this down everyone's throat and show that they're doing nothing worth being disgusted by.
im just sorry they're facing these shitty comments too.*

hanbinsung

> so.

> just the same hoodie from the other night?

> no suggestive captions?

Zhang Hao! :D

> i posted. whew.

> i think it's clear?? what do you think?

> idk binbinah caption it however you want i talked about completely different things

> this is more stressful than i thought huhh

hanbinsung

> ok saw your post woooooow

> about to schedule my post for tomorrow

> i read the articles btw

Zhang Hao! :D

> my fave replies so far were the ones acting like i didn't call the photographer on purpose

hanbinsung

> :D

> [hanbinsung sent a photo]

> we're going to rehearsals!!

Zhang Hao! :D

> say hi to your friends!

> and good luck with rehearsals!!

> and

hanbinsung

> and?

Zhang Hao! :D

> you look good in that shirt.

> bye. have nice rehearsals.

hanbinsung

> don't i deserve to see you too?

Zhang Hao! :D

> you have rehearsals. go rehearse.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago

hao yesterday with that photo where he was reading that novel and the hat was hanging in the background

+

hanbin today with a chinese grammar book and the arm of the hoodie in that same color

idk they're trying to say something

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago

and by something i mean: they're addressing the rumor and confirming it.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago

don't qrt me i'm silencing this, i know im right.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago

no bc how will y'all pretend this isn't intentional, when one shared a novel that he's said before was gifted to him by hanbin and the other one was freaking studying hao's mother language???? and the clothing items?? identical to that pap photo??

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago

no bc yk what im thinking,,,,,,,,, maybe they WANTED to be caught???? idk i just want it to be true so much,,,,,,

Hao felt the adrenaline rush throughout his whole body. It was like all his senses were heightened by the sheer excitement of being back on a music show's stage after what felt like forever. They'd never gotten these many cheers from the public, either. Which meant that maybe, this time, there was actually a chance. The others were similarly overexcited, and Hao could feel his heart grow three sizes just by looking at them. "Hyung," Seungeon walked closer to him, a glow in his eyes that made him look like he was about to jump up and down from the joy (which, anyway, Gyuvin had been doing for a while). "Hyung, I'm so happy I get to do this with you," he said. Hao's smile widened, he patted him on his head.

"I know," he took a deep breath. "I'm so damn happy, too." Seungeon dragged him into a hug, which somehow turned into a disorderly group hug in the next five seconds. The make-up artist from their company yelled at them to stop crying before they even went back to filming, she wouldn't have time to fix their foundation. "Let's make it unforgettable," Hao said. The others nodded, all squeezing each others' hands for support and to energize themselves.

It went by in a blur. They managed to get a perfect performance on the first try and Hao had the distinct feeling that he couldn't remember what he'd done on stage for the life of him. He knew they'd slayed it, he was aware of it. Other than that? Nothing. They were sent to change up, they would have to be interviewed briefly by the MCs, before they could actually be free to go outside the venue. Who knows if there would be a small crowd of fans waiting for them? "Hyung," Gyuvin called him. "Your phone's ringing."

Hao picked up immediately. And, at the same time, he bolted from the changing room where the four of them were stationed to the corridor. "It's eight in the morning, why are you calling?" He said, in lieu of a hello.

On the other end, Hanbin's raucous laughter broke out. It sounded like he wasn't even fully awake. It might as well be the case, he'd been up all night to shoot a video with his group, why was he calling? "I wanted to wish you luck for the TV recording," Hanbin said. Hao's heart did something stupid. "But, I mean, look at the time. I think I'm late."

"Yeah," Hao's reply was too enthusiastic, clearly overcompensating for the tachycardic pulse in his ears. "You're really, like, the worst." Hanbin laughed, again.

"How was it?"

"*Amazing*," Hao couldn't avoid the grin spreading on his face. "Unbelievable, it's just, when you're here it's like everything we've been through was worth it." Three girls in a mock school uniform passed in front of him. He bowed his head. "Oh my *god*, Bin-ah." Hao didn't let him reply, "You won't believe it, guess who just walked in front of me?"

Hanbin diligently played along with him, enumerating group names in all seriousness until he got to the correct one. "Shit, are you serious?" Hanbin sounded excited, too. "What if they invite you to film a challenge?"

"Then I die," Hao immediately replied. "Oh, it's too good. It almost doesn't feel real." Hanbin chuckled quietly. "It's a pity you're not here, too."

"When you move on to promoting the B-side," Hanbin had memorized their schedule? "Then we'll be promoting our title, and we'll be there, too." The following silence was a bit too long. "I can't wait to see you on TV," Hanbin added. A junior manager from Hao's company, the one who'd driven them today, materialized in front of him. He didn't look pleased. "I'll set camp in front of it and-"

"Hanbin-ie," he interrupted him. "I have to go. Thanks for calling," he started following the manager back to their changing room.

“Of course,” Hanbin said, good-naturedly. As always. “Talk to you later?”

Hao’s eyes closed instinctively. He still didn’t know whether Hanbin kept insisting they talked later because he *wanted* to talk to him or because he was overly polite and it was his way of saying goodbye without implying he was done with him. He tried not to stress about it. Clearly, he was failing. “Obviously,” he said. “Get some more sleep!” He added in a hurry, right before Hanbin hung up.

His manager was looking at him with some degree of perplexity on his face. Hao tried to look away from his inquiring stare. He didn’t have anything to say. His phone had rung, he’d taken the call. That was it. “If you needed to go away to talk to your boyfriend,” the manager said, completely, a hundred percent, serious. “You should have said so beforehand. I can’t stay with the others *and* follow you as you walk by while talking on the phone.”

Hao frowned. “He’s-” *not my boyfriend*, he wanted to say. But maybe this manager didn’t know it was a farce? Maybe it was only known to the members, and the CEOs, and the senior managers? “I’m sorry,” he ended up saying. “I will be more responsible.”

The manager rolled his eyes. “I didn’t believe the articles,” he said. Hao looked at his face carefully. “But, what do you know, turns out they really were right.” Hao flushed red. He waited for the manager to keep talking, for him to comment a bit further. “My advice? Be more discreet. Maybe you’ll break up and people will still be asking about him for years to come. And don’t be on the phone with your lover where everyone can hear you.”

His? Lover? He felt like he should laugh. Thinking about him and Hanbin as lovers was somewhat insane. Pretending to be boyfriends, okay, he could do it. But the word *lover* implied — so much more. Not that Hao wanted to focus on the implications. Him and Hanbin were friends. Colleagues, in a way. Project partners. Who cared that Hanbin always called him to ask about his day, who cared that hearing Hanbin’s voice was becoming a favorite part of his day.

It wasn’t rare that Hanbin spent a good half of his days at the university campus. It wasn’t like his company had better things for him to do, most of the time. Lately, though, it had become a rarer occurrence, and he was happy about it, because, of course, it meant that he could do his actual job, but, at the same time, he liked being on campus. He liked that he could sit down in one of the library’s armchairs — isolated, in front of a big window that looked out on the soccer field — and no one would bother him. It was a privilege he didn’t have anywhere else, not being bothered by anyone. So, he connected his earphones to his iPad, and he clicked play on the YouTube video right in front of him. Aw4ke had been invited on a semi-unknown talk show, and they were extremely happy about it, so here Hanbin was: ignoring a paper he should be writing in favor of watching the interview his friends had done. In the last few weeks, the two groups had become very close. Not necessarily because he was often over at their dorm, or vice versa, because him going over at Hao’s didn’t mean that Taerae should text with Quanrui all the time. Still, they’d found out they played the same games, and there they were: new best friends. The talk show wasn’t, admittedly, exciting. Gunwook would have liked it nonetheless, Hanbin thought. But that was because Gunwook made it a point of only having nice words for everything and also knowing every single k-pop talk show, variety show, music show, *whatever*- show that was aired and produced in the Republic of Korea. How he did that? Hanbin had no idea. Still, the host was a middle-aged man, who may or may not have been more famous when he was younger. And he was sitting at this table with the four boys, who were trying to eat something, while he asked one question after the other.

“Is it true that your mother insisted you auditioned for your company?” The host asked, as Seungeon and Hao exchanged a glance. Hanbin wanted to ask them what they’d been thinking about.

“Yeah,” Gyuvin laughed. “She claimed that I should totally try, she drove me to the audition herself.” He droned on about this for a while, until the interviewer moved on to the next question, for Quanrui, and to the next and so forth. It was good to see them like that, finally able to get some recognition. They talked about their album, they spoke of their own contributions to it — some dance routines they’d created themselves, the contributions to the album cover, the ideas for the photos. It was amazing how happy they were to share these things. Hanbin took a glance at the views on the video. It was a good enough number, for them. He prayed it would grow.

“Hao-ssi,” there was a weird subtitle on the screen, superimposed on the video. It read *Wonjin is a curious uncle*. And there was a silly filter, too, with hearts and Cupid bows and all. “Hao-ssi, you’ve made quite an impression on your fans, you’re considered a heartthrob, they’re all in love with you.” Hao laughed, forced. Or, well. It looked forced to Hanbin, but it may look convincing enough for viewers. They’d never seen Hao snort mid-laughter or bend over with it, or run out of breath and hit Hanbin because it was, somehow, his fault that he was laughing that hard. “But

some of them believe you're in love with someone else?"

"With someone else?" Hao frowned a little, his handsome face still perfect even when he faked being confused. "My fans always come first in my heart." Oh, he'd studied well.

The host wasn't letting it go. "So there is no special girl in Hao-ssi's life, he says." A pause. "Any special friend, at least?"

The camera cut to Hao, who blinked twice. "Well, I spend a lot of time with a friend who's a bit special, yes," he said. "But I don't think he fits the definition of special *friend* very much," Hanbin's hands, holding the iPad, were icy with the thought that Hao was really going to say it.

"Are we getting a confession, Hao-ssi?" Of course. Of course no one would have thought of running this fucking interview through Hanbin, too.

"Oh, no," Hao smiled. "We've settled that matter between us already," he laughed it off with a wink. "He's not as good or special as our fans, anyway. It's them who's the truest special friend I have, they're the reason we're doing this everyday-" Hanbin stopped listening. He stopped the video altogether. And then he started scrolling the comments on YouTube. *He should have just said his name at this point*, one said. *He didn't even try to hide that he fancies men. And He meant Hanbin, right? Of course he had to mean him, who else. And So if they've settled the matter it means they're together? And wtf he's just come out on national tv.* And, save for the fact that this wasn't neither national nor TV, Hao'd done that. Hao had fucking done that. There was no going back now, he was out, and Hanbin was out right along with him because this was the easiest sum of two and two anyone had ever done. Shit. *Fuck*. He ran a search on Naver, but he knew what the results would be. *Aw4ke Hao and 5stars Hanbin relationship supposedly true*. Everyone he knew would see this. Fuck.

Zhang Hao! :D

> *I was promised they would cut it. I didn't know. They're assholes who went for the blow because they knew it would make the video viral, but I SWEAR they said they'd cut it.*

> *I would have told you.*

> *I promise, Hanbin, I'm not that interested in getting views. You have to know.*

> *You're angry. Right?*

hanbinsung

> *Not angry*

> *It was what we wanted, wasn't it?*

Zhang Hao! :D

> *I'm sorry. For real.*

hanbinsung

> *Hyung*

> *i believe you*

> *can we, like, just hang out tomorrow but not talk now?*

> *i think i need to rest a bit.*

Zhang Hao! :D

> *Tomorrow my schedule clears at 10PM. I'll meet you then, if you're okay with it?*

> *It's not to pressure you.*

> *I can do it the day after, even. I don't know.*

> *I feel horrible rn.*

hanbinsung

> *hyungggggggg*

> *i promise I'm alright!*

> *I'll see you tomorrow!!*

> *[hanbinsung sent a sticker]*

Zhang Hao! :D

> [Zhang Hao! :D sent a sticker]

Hanbin waited a whole hour before he gave in. He called his mother. He should have told her sooner, of course. It was clear, now. He should have updated his family that his job description now featured pretending to be dating another colleague. But he hadn't, because he knew his mother would have complained that it wasn't worth it. That his private life should remain private and not be manipulated into *this*. And he would have had to tell her that he didn't give a fuck about privacy, if he had to keep seeing his group mates sad.

"Bini-yah!" His mother sounded a bit too cheerful when she picked up. "How's my baby doing?"

He took a deep breath. "Mom, there's a news article that's circulating about me," he said. Best to rip the whole band aid out in one go.

"What about? I've been working until now, I haven't checked social media yet, today. Work's been quite busy, are you happy?" Hanbin closed his eyes hard.

"It's a dating scandal," he said. He waited for his mom to readjust her phone on the other ear, judging from the noise she produced.

"Is it with someone horrible? Is that why you're calling? To make sure I won't fall for the news that you're dating, like, a genocidal businessman's daughter?"

He hated that he had to say "I'm calling because the news is telling the truth." His mother was silent for a short time. He went on. "It's not with a monster, it's with my friend from another group."

His mom waited before she spoke again. He checked if the call was still connected. "You're dating a friend from another group? How long? Are you happy?"

"Mom, my friend is a boy," he added. "And now everyone who sees that news will-" he had to take a breath. "Everyone will feel like they have the right to say whether this is right or wrong." She waited for him to go on. "We knew it would happen, like. I knew there would be articles about it and all, but now that I've seen them I- What if they're right? What if we should have stayed silent?"

His mom took a deep breath, too. "I'm not allowing you to be ashamed," she said. "You have *no right* to be ashamed of this. It's nothing shameful. Love is always right. Always, Bin-ah, do you hear me?"

He nodded, which was useless. "Yeah," he said. A single tear ran on his cheek. He wiped it.

"What's this friend like, son?" His mother asked, then. And he had to wipe away more than a tear, now that he was thinking about Hao worrying that he might have seen the interview, worrying that he might have hurt him without meaning to.

"He's kind," he replied. "He's great, and he loves the people around him so fiercely and with such determination that anyone would give a kidney to be loved by him just for a second, you know?"

There was another pause on his mom's end. "I like that the first thing you mentioned was that he's kind," she said. "Hanbin, your mom will always love you. And so will your dad, and that smartass sister you have who's showing me this damned article right now. Your friend looks good in these photos, is he really that pretty? Oh, what a handsome son-in-law we've got!" Hanbin laughed.

"His name's Hao," Hanbin said. And, only after his mom had ended the call, after updating him on his sister's intentions for university and how she was asking for them to adopt a cat, he realized he'd never mentioned a rather important element: he wasn't actually dating Hao. It was a PR operation. Why was he so damn stupid?

He wasn't a fan of the situation at hand. He wished he could've talked to Hanbin in private, face to face, before they found themselves dealing with the paparazzi once more. But Dr. Ji had been unmovable and her strategizing assertiveness had been met with incredible support by Hao's boss, so here he was. He was sitting in Hanbin's car, in the passenger's seat, and it was the first time they were seeing each other after that criminal aired the uncut version of their interview. Hao had already sent a lawyer on his back, but the news was already everywhere and he couldn't even begin to explain why he was hating all this so much.

Hanbin was fumbling with the radio, switching from station to station as if he was looking for something in particular. Hao wished he could come up with something intelligent to say. They'd already been through the most banal conversations: sorry for all this, you don't have to be sorry, but I feel terrible, you shouldn't feel terrible *he* should. And then they'd proceeded to share a bit about their days, just to keep it going. But it felt forced in a way it had never been

before, not even the first time. Not even when they'd exchanged those first mechanical texts.

"I'm going to be honest," Hao started. He'd started every conversation tonight. Hanbin's round eyes focused on him yet again. In the dim light, cast over them by a streetlight, he looked like a painting from the European renaissance. "I don't like the way I feel right now. I feel guilty and I feel like this is wrong, and I want this to feel good. Because, two days ago, it *was* good. We were good. How do I make us go back to that?"

Hanbin was just looking at him, and he wasn't saying anything, and it was driving him crazy. Because how else could he phrase this? How else could he *fix* this? "Hao hyung," he finally spoke. He had a low voice, and Hao wished he could undo whatever he'd done wrong. "I've told you a million times already. I'm fine. We're fine."

"But we're not," Hao interrupted him. "You're not saying anything and I'm here, stressing and going insane and—"

"What should we do, then? Do you want us to go and beat that asshole out? Would that help? Do you want us to, I don't know, create a stupid fake profile on Naver to insult him and maybe insult our CEOs too, while we're at it?" Hao couldn't find the words. "It's fine, really, whatever you want to do to be at peace, I'll do it with you. Because I'm fine, I swear, but maybe it's you who's not fine." Hanbin had gone for the kill, apparently.

"You'd do that?" He found himself asking.

"Beating someone? No, I don't think I could," Hanbin was smiling and his smile was so damn pretty and Hao wanted to cry because he'd been right. It had been him who wasn't fine. "But I can shit talk anyone at any given time, I'm good at bitching." It shouldn't make Hao laugh like that, but he was laughing and the weight on his chest was drifting away. He doubted Hanbin was able to out-bitch him, but he was willing to let him try. Maybe he was also willing to make him win, just this once.

They were supposed to be "caught" by the paparazzi as they sat in this car. Except the fucking photographer was always late and they'd been sitting here forever, and Hao's legs were cramping. "So, I'm starting promotion next week," Hanbin said, after they'd been through a few rounds of Tetris on Hao's phone. "And it'll be the first time we're on TV together. *And* there's that article going round, so people are expecting something."

Hao sighed. "What are you willing to give them?"

Hanbin looked lost in thought for a few seconds. He was cute, when he puffed his cheeks like that, he looked younger and he looked like someone who hadn't had to think about many things so far. Of course, Hao knew it wasn't like that. But still, he found it endearing. "I was thinking, we should attend each other's pre-rec." Hanbin suggested. "You know fans will tweet about what happens at pre-rec, so let's give them stuff to write." Hao nodded, emphatically. It was a good idea. It was doable, it would give them the image of two people who really care about each other, while keeping them professional. "And then, if we're on stage together," Hanbin hesitated. "Let's, like, look at each other?"

"How bold!" Hao made fun of him, watching Hanbin's confused face morph into laughter. Hanbin hit him lightly on his thigh. And it also hit Hao that they were sitting really close. And that people would see photos of them in such a close situation. And then the interviews and the news and they would just *assume*. "People are going to think we've been making out."

Hanbin laughed even harder. "Well," he said, after sobering up a bit. "Yeah. Yeah, they'll think that, I mean. I hope it won't be the *first* thing they'll think, but they will." Hao suddenly felt a bit too hot, as if Hanbin's car hadn't the aircon turned on at twenty degrees. "What's worrisome about that?"

Hao could lay out an itemized list in half a minute, if he wanted. He was horrified because it would mean people would think about his life in too close detail. Because they would speculate about things he wished to keep to himself. Like, who kissed who first, maybe. Or, who was more affectionate. Or, even, who led whom. But the worst thing, and the reason why this list couldn't make it out of his own head, was that he wondered, too. Would Hanbin be affectionate to him like he was to his group mates? Would Hanbin be sweet? Would he be the type to take control or would he let Hao take the reins? An even worse thing: he could find out. If he really wanted to, he could find out. He could, because there was nowhere Hanbin could go, now. And he, being the best person Hao had ever met in his life, wouldn't even cut him off, he would let him and only after he would reject him in the sweetest possible way, and Hao would have to live with the shame of having taken advantage of Hanbin's incommensurable kindness. But then, the worst line of thought ever: Hanbin might not reject him at all. Hanbin, who was beautiful and who would do anything for anyone, might even accept him, let him believe this and Hao would have to live with the knowledge of what it was to have Sung Hanbin, only for him to have to let him go when their bosses said so.

"It's not *worrisome*," he replied, his cheeks boiling up. "It's awkward. I've never even held your hand or anything. And they'll think we've covered all the bases."

Now it was Hanbin's turn to blush up to his cheekbones. His face caught fire in a split second, Hao pretended not

to notice. "Okay," he said, recovering quite well. "I can see that. I can let you hold my hand, if you want."

"Oh, you can *let me*. How generous you are, Hanbin-ah," Hao took in the way Hanbin's smile turned somewhat sheepish. He shook his head. "Fine, *let me* hold your pretty hand."

Hanbin silently extended his hand over the gear shift. Hao snatched it closer to his legs, taking it with his own left hand. He tried not minding how his heart was threatening to beat out of his chest. Hanbin wasn't the first boy he liked. Hanbin wasn't the first boy he'd been attracted to. Hell, he'd *kissed* people. He'd touched them, too. So why was he feeling like this when Hanbin's fingers softly clung to his, when his wrist fell to rest on his thigh.

"Your photographer friend's here," Hanbin said. It was like seven hours had passed, but it couldn't be more than seven seconds. A car had just been parked right on the opposite side of the street to them. Hao took a deep breath.

"Let's make sure our faces are well visible this time?" He was way less confident than he sounded. Hanbin squeezed his hand. He didn't let go of it, if anything, he held on tighter to Hao. If this was different, Hao thought, if their respective groups weren't part of this, if he and Hanbin were just two friends hanging out on a late spring night, he would let it all go to hell. He would use his other hand to pull at Hanbin's shirt and kiss him straight on his mouth. As it was, he willed his heart to slow down.

"I'll follow your lead, hyung," Hanbin said. Hao smiled at him, as he pulled out his phone from his pocket.

Hao and Hanbin (Aw4ke, 5stars) on a date. NEW PHOTOS.

Last night, the two idols were caught on an intimate occasion, as they were (reportedly) coming back from an outing. The two idols (according to some sources) have been trying to make room for each other among busy schedules. Aw4ke has been promoting a comeback, while 5stars will start promotions in two days. This would explain why they met so late at night. The photos clearly show them inside a car, visibly in high spirits. There's still no confirmation from their agencies, but Hao has stated in a recent interview that Hanbin's status to him equals that of a "special friend" where "the term friend is possibly not the most fitting". He also stated that "they've said to each other everything there was to be said".

We'll update with statements, in the event they are released.

user7887815 commented:

but why should they be photographed while they're on their private business????? leave them be.

user141515 commented:

they're so cuteeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!!

user989879 commented:

i don't understand why these people are relevant in the first place. let's stop making them relevant, if they have to behave like this.

[AJ ENTERTAINMENT — OFFICIAL NOTICE — 5STARS HANBIN PRIVACY VIOLATION ISSUES]

Hello,

This is Ji Ara, CEO of AJ Ent. I am taking the time to address the issue personally, as we are a small company and we put our honor in valuing our artists and putting their interest first.

In the last few weeks, there have been multiple occasions where our artist's privacy has been invaded, to the point of printing and spreading photos of him taken in private occasions.

The company invites you not to spread the pictures. Measures have been taken on our side.

Thank you for your cooperation,
Ji Ara of AJ Ent.

kyobin

- > *Hyung!!!*
- > *Wanna see what my mom made??*

hanbinsung

- > *Hey!!*
- > *Hi, Kim GyuBin good morning!!*
- > *Sure!*

kyobin

- > *[kyobin sent a photo]*
- > *it's an embroidery of our album cover!!!!!!!!!!*
- > *She said that she wanted to learn some new skills!*
- > *Hao hyung said it's amazing, but I wanted to show it to you, too!*

hanbinsung

- > *:O*
- > *i LOVE it!*
- > *Your mother is really good at that!!*
- > *Thank you for showing me!*

kyobin

- > *nooooooooooooo*
- > *Don't say it like I'm doing you this huge favor, you know I really like you, do you? Like, you're so cool, hyung. You can do everything and you're always nice to everyone. ANd you're super cool, did I say that?*
- > *Also, you're like super good to Hao hyung. He's less worried about, like, the state of the world, now that you're his friend.*

hanbinsung

- > *[sticker]*
- > *ah gyubin-ah, what should i say to you?*
- > *I'm glad I met all of you, too.*

kyobin

- > *But me especially, right?????*

hanbinsung

- > *AHAHAHHAHAHAH*
- > *yes. of course. you in particular.*
- > *I'm not sarcastic.*
- > *Like, I mean it. You're the most energetic person I know, I like that a lot, too!!*
- > *We should hang out, sometimes!!*

kyobin

- > *OMG*
- > *Yes.*
- > *Oh god, I can't believe I'm actually becoming your friend!*
- > *Can I brag about this with Hao hyung?*

hanbinsung

- > *You're a free man, Gyubinnie?*

> *Can you say hi to him for me, though?*

kyobin

> *of course!!*

> *(Also, my brother totally fell for the PR thing, he believes you two are super in love and he's like all up in your business, keeps asking me things. He said you should post some photos together. I'm telling you bc Hao hyung is an obstructionist.)*

hanbinsung

> *I had to go look it up in the dictionary.*

> *Anyway.*

> *Say hi to Hao-ge. I have to go now :(*

> *Tell him I'll text him later??*

kyobin

> *..... i will, but like,, you could have texted him yourself.*

“Did you know your mother texted me the other day?” Kuanjui was talking from his couch in the house he shared with three other members of his dance company. He was celebrating the fact that they’d all left the house at the same time, using the common space for his own necessities. Hao had seen his house thoroughly, through a first video call they’d made back when Kuanjui had just moved to Taipei. It was why he could identify the new poster hanging behind Kuanjui, even though he still had to decipher it completely.

“What?” They’d been talking about Kuanjui’s insane rehearsal schedule until now, what did Hao’s mother have to do with it? “What did she want?”

“She wanted me to tell you that ever since I’ve left Seoul you’ve gone insane,” Kuanjui wouldn’t lie, but why would Hao’s mom go and complain about him to a third person? She’d never been shy to complain directly to him.

Hao checked his phone briefly, looking away from his computer for a few seconds. “I haven’t even heard from her in like a whole week, I don’t understand why she would text *you* and not me. Her own son.” Kuanjui laughed quietly, and then he brought out his own phone.

“She wrote: *Hi, Kuanjui dearest. How have you been? Hao tells me you’re currently performing in a ballet. I’d like to come see it, before your run ends. This said, have you heard from Hao recently? I think he’d do better if you were there, I don’t think all these developments would have taken place if you’d been there. However, I hope you two talk soon. Let me know about your show. The end.*”

Hao felt a headache develop right from the frown in the middle of his forehead to the back of his head, his neck, his shoulders. He must have made some weird expression, because Kuanjui laughed out loud. “She’s a handful,” he commented, dry. “If she comes to see you before she comes to visit me I’ll be very angry, though,” he said. His mother being his mother, he still missed her sometimes, and they’d had really few occasions to be together in the last few years. Despite his work not being really thick with scheduled errands, he was supposed to stay in Seoul most of the time anyway. And his mother wasn’t a fan of flying out multiple times a year just to visit him. “Also, I thought I would try to come to Taipei in late July, would you like that?”

Kuanjui all but yelled. Hao jumped on his mattress. Why was his best friend insane? The door to his room opened, Seungeon’s worried face appearing in the crack of the door he’d just opened. He took in the setting, and he just shook his head, walking away. “Was that Seungie?” Kuanjui’s eyes were really bright with happiness. “*Seungie!*” He kept yelling. “*I miss you, how are you?*” He dragged the question out, whiny. Hao sighed, getting up from his bed, almost tripping in his own slippers. He fished Seungeon out of his room, to get him to say hi to Kuanjui properly.

Seungeon sat on Hao’s mattress comfortably, crossing his legs on the bed. “I thought Hao hyung had killed someone in his room, and it was just you. Disappointing,” Seungeon said, with a smile. “How are you, you deserter?”

“Yah,” Kuanjui mimicked punching him through the screen. “You’re so rude and for what. I was so happy to see your ugly face, and this is how you repay me?” Hao laughed quietly, sitting close to Seungeon. “I’m doing wonderful, however. I’m getting paid to dance, so life’s real good.”

Seungeon nodded, relaxed. “I’ve never cared once about your job, hyung,” he said, and Hao was so happy to see

them slip immediately back into the borderline bullying dynamic they'd always had, even when they were trainees together. Seungeon was the same age as Gyuvin and Quanrui, but they were all convinced that he had an old soul and they'd let him become closer to the older trainees without minding too much. "Now, what I've always cared about is who you're dating. So, please tell me there's some juice there."

Hao laughed again, preparing to hear again the tale of the two different guys Kuanjui was juggling, and to see Seungeon insult him because it wasn't nice of him to act like that. Seungeon didn't hold himself back, to the point where Kuanjui admitted he should sort his shit out, because he couldn't allow his own dongsaeng to treat him like that. Pleased with his achievement, Seungeon elected to leave them to talk alone another while. Hao knew Seungeon wasn't done with this, they would have to pick it back up sooner or later.

"So, you'd like to visit on your birthday?" Kuanjui picked up from where they'd left off before. Hao looked at his calendar app, sighing a bit.

"I don't know, really. I'd like to go home for my birthday, to be honest. Maybe later, though? Like, the week after? If I can manage to have like seven-eight days for myself from the company, that is." Kuanjui nodded, pensively. He looked like he was thinking hard about something. Hao waited for him to speak out, while he checked some notifications on his phone, too. There were some texts from Hanbin, too. He opened them, without much thought, and he began replying.

"I'd like to come to Seoul at some point," Kuanjui said, after a few seconds. Hao looked up at him. "We should have a break around next month. But I don't know if I can afford the flight yet," Hao nodded. "Otherwise, I'd be able to come, like, in autumn. After Chuseok. But I was genuinely curious to meet your Hanbin, and who knows if he'll still be able to stand you all those months from now."

Hao let out the loudest sigh yet. "He's not *my* Hanbin. He's just Hanbin," he pointed out, knowing how useless it was. But it was a matter of principle. "And I think we'll be fine in September, it's not like we have to kill each other to put an end to a fake relationship, anyway." He went back to replying to his texts, as he'd left a sentence halfway, to answer Kuanjui.

"You're texting him while you're on the phone with me?" Kuanjui sounded scandalized. Hao felt his ears warm up.

"It was you encouraging me not to leave him hanging in texts, if I recall correctly," he shot back. Kuanjui was suspiciously silent for too long a while. Hao had to check what he was up to. "What?"

"You just. Like, don't take it as an insult." Hao raised his hand, innocent. "But, just. What are you planning to do about him? Because you like him, Hao."

Hao knew he couldn't lie to him, not about anything, but not about this in particular. "Yeah," he said, quiet. "But I'm not really planning to do anything. I have to let this thing run its course, and then, after they will be okay with us letting go of it, I'll see. Maybe it'll pass on its own."

Kuanjui regarded him silently, for a while yet. "It's a rational plan," he said. "But, won't it be hard on you? Isn't it hard to see him all the time like this?"

"I like seeing him," Hao was quick to say. Too quick. "And it isn't hard to spend time together, even if I kinda broke the rules of this thing."

Kuanjui took a loud breath. "Please tell me there wasn't a contract explicitly stating you shouldn't catch feelings." Hao laughed, finally relieved by this absurdity.

"Of course not, you dumb dumb," he was smiling hard. "Anyway, circling back to my mother, she called as soon as she saw my talk show. She *scolded* me, can you believe?"

Kuanjui raised his eyebrows high. "Why?"

"She doesn't like the fact that I have to pretend to date someone just to get publicity," he explained. "She insists that this was a wrong choice of career, because it's undignified that I have to be subjected to this." It didn't matter that he'd told her how he *chose* it, and how he kind of manipulated the whole operation by himself, by deciding what to say to whom and when to call the paparazzi and everything.

Kuanjui huffed a laugh. "It's insane, she's right. But she doesn't appreciate how hot your fake boyfriend is," he added.

Hao thought it would be rather weird if his mom commented on Hanbin that way. "She actually said he's a better dancer than I am," he said, and it was so absurd to say it that he couldn't help but laugh again. "But she's still displeased about it all. She thinks we should take a step back, take back what's already out, not come out any more."

Kuanjui's gaze went softer. "She's worried for you," he said. Yeah, Hao knew. But, his feelings for Hanbin aside,

this pretense was already bringing its fruits, and it was giving him — them — the chance to be even more of themselves in the public eye. And more than they could have been without this ruse.

“You know what was super nice of her, instead?” Hao said, while a warm smile spread on his face at the memory of the last phone call he’d had with his mom. He made a note to tell Hanbin about this, too. “She started off by complaining about me having to do this PR bullshit, as per her words, and then she stopped and she said that she didn’t have problems with the *person*, because she’d been ready to see me with a boy for a long time. Then she went on bitching, but I was kind of dumbstruck.” Kuanjui was smiling widely, too.

“That’s great,” he said. “Like, that’s a huge step forward.” Hao nodded.

“Can’t believe my mom was more ready to accept me being gay than she is accepting I work as an idol,” he commented. Kuanjui broke out in a roaring laughter. Again, his laptop went tumbling to the side. It was good, Hao’s life. There were these moments, where it all felt nice: the people he had around, the way he felt around them, both his friends and his family, and the fact that his job was becoming easier, these days.

Sung Han Bin <3

> *hyungiee my sunbae from school told me there’s a small film festival next week, want to go?*

> *[Sung Han Bin <3 sent a photo]*

> *Jiwoong hyung and Seok Matthew want to go, but I can’t stand third-wheeling them.*

janghao

> *1. this is not “a” film festival, it’s a queer film festival, of course we’re going.*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *Awesome! I’ll tell my sunbae and I’ll tell the others, also, feel free to tell it to Gyubinnie and Ricky and Seungie, because Matt is inviting everyone and I’d hate for them not to know.*

janghao

> *sorry got sidetracked*

> *anyway*

> *2. wdyam third-wheeling???????*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *heehhehe*

janghao

> *Hanbinaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah*

> *i want to knowwwwwwww*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *You’ve been around them, come on.*

janghao

> *but are they?*

> *oh GOD.*

> *they are, aren’t they?*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *They are and they aren’t.*

> *It’s not really linear. However, now that you and I have this, like, media-acclaimed relationship, they’re like more “normal” and, listen man, I don’t know. Don’t let me be alone with them, is all I’m asking.*

janghao

> *i already said yes.*

> *i’m shocked by this information.*

janghao

> *no, stop talking.*

> *Actually, don't stop.*

> *Keep talking.*

Gunwook groaned one last time in front of his homework. "I don't get it," he said. Matthew sighed loudly on the opposite side of the kitchen table.

"What's there to get?" Matthew complained. "It's a written composition in English, you have to write as if you were writing for a magazine and follow the topic. It's fucking easy."

Gunwook's eyes went round at the aggressivity. "Yeah, for you. You have spoken English since you were born," he tried to protest.

"I've had to learn Korean, though. It's harder." Matthew countered, a flicker of his eyebrow, defiant. "You can't even write perfect Korean grammar when you're a native, tell me again how hard English is, come on." Hanbin was cutting some tomatoes, as he was making a salad to go with the meat Taerae had gone to buy. He laughed at the innocent fighting between his members, his friends.

"Hyung," Gunwook turned to him, a bit whiny in his voice. "Tell Matthew hyung that my grammar is good."

"His grammar is very good," Hanbin readily admitted. Gunwook's smile was gummy and happy. He went to ruffle his hair, as Matthew shook his head, disappointed. "But Matthew's right, you should write this easily." It was Matthew's turn to grin.

"You know," Matthew took Gunwook's assignment from his hands. "Even Jiwoong hyung managed to get good scores in English in college, after all."

Jiwoong emerged from behind the door, buttoning up his shirt. He was leaving before lunch for a photo shoot he'd been called to. He hadn't been the first choice, but the original model had dropped out and they had called him as replacement. It was the first time some external agency reached out to their company for something like this. It was huge progress. "What do you mean *even Jiwoong hyung*?" Hanbin and Gunwook shared a glance. They both looked away, Gunwook suddenly focusing on his composition, Hanbin turning back to the salad. "I was a good student, I'll have you know."

"And you had a good tutor, too," Matthew pointed out, unwavering.

"I'm leaving, by the way. My car is already here," Jiwoong sounded the tiniest bit nervous. Hanbin threw a silent glance at Matthew, who handed the sheet back to Gunwook.

"Do you want me to come with you, hyung?" Matthew had been ready to go for about thirty minutes, it was why he was sitting at the kitchen table with a better sweater than he would've worn at home and with jeans, instead of sweatpants. It was also why they'd told Taerae to only buy meat for three. Jiwoong nodded, without saying anything else. Matthew got up, with a light slap at Gunwook's nape, and off they went.

Gunwook kept looking at Hanbin for a while after the other two left. "Hyung," he started. Hanbin washed his hands and sat down next to him. Sometimes, being the second oldest implied that he had to give a lot of support to the youngest people, as well as to Jiwoong too, who felt too much pressure from being both the leader of their group and the oldest one. "Hyung, where will I stay when you all leave this dorm to stay with your boyfriends?"

Hanbin laughed, hanging loosely from Gunwook's overly muscular arm. What was he so big for, young as he was? "Do I look like someone who's got a boyfriend you have to worry about? I'm not going anywhere, Wookie. And even if I were living elsewhere, you would surely find a way to room with one of us, if you don't get too tired of us. Okay?"

Gunwook regarded him with some degree of suspicion. "You do have a boyfriend, literally," he pointed out.

Hanbin hit him lightly on his shoulder. "Not for real," he said, shrugging. Gunwook's raised eyebrow spoke of a different opinion.

"And why are you hanging out with your fake boyfriend this afternoon, then?" Gunwook hadn't shifted by a single

centimeter, clearly enjoying the way Hanbin was half babying him. Hanbin pinched his forearm. He winced.

“Because we’re both free today, and it’s sunny outside,” he explained. “Can’t I go for a walk with a friend, now?”

Hanbin wasn’t a liar. He might have a thousand flaws, but he never lied to others on purpose. So he’d been perfectly honest when he’d told Gunwook that there was no weird, hidden agenda as to why he’d agreed to see Hao that afternoon. It wasn’t hard to admit that he happily enjoyed Hao’s company whenever he had the opportunity. Did the circumstances under which they’d become friends have to matter? Couldn’t they just be glad that the insane plan they’d been dragged in was working and that it wasn’t tiring to make it work? Hanbin knew he was happy it had turned out this way. It made it all less scary, in a way. Even though he sometimes stumbled on some online comment about the two of them, it was easier to accept that they were talking about him and Hao, when he was the first who actually liked being around Hao.

“Why did you ask me to go out with you today?” He still asked, because, somehow, Gunwook’s question had been enough to send a thousand questions swimming around his head. Hao turned to him with the slightest frown, then he turned back to look at the sunny riverside park.

“Did you have something else to do?” Hao replied, without replying at all. Sometimes, he still did that, like that first time. He tried to gauge Hanbin’s intentions by delaying his own answers.

Hanbin looked away, too. Summer was approaching quickly, too quickly. His birthday was coming up and creeping up on him, he didn’t know how to set up celebrations. They were supposed to be performing somewhere, he was sure. Promotions should be already over, but maybe there would be some school festival? He was lost. “It’s not why I’ve asked,” he replied. “I’m glad I went out, but, like, what prompted you to ask *me* to come for a stroll?”

Hao slowed down, and it was like he was studying the portion of Hanbin’s face that emerged from his mask. His eyes, then. “Weeks ago, you mentioned you like taking walks in nature, or something.” The Han River park was far from being *in nature*, but Hanbin wasn’t going to point that out. “I don’t know, Hanbin-ah, I wanted to go out with a friend. Is it weird?”

No, it’s not weird. And Hanbin made sure to say it, but at the same time wasn’t it the same thing he himself had said to Gunwook? So, now, why did it feel so out of place when Hao said the same? “Nevermind,” he said, later. “Ice cream?” Hao frowned at him a while longer, but, in the end, he accepted the ice cream cone he was already going to buy for him.

He let Hao talk and chatter about how much he wanted to go shopping extensively, but couldn’t find the time to. Moreover, he was saying, he wouldn’t really have all the money he would like to spend. Which was very saddening, wasn’t it? Hanbin thought it was quite sad, yeah. Not a catastrophe, though. “We could go shopping the day after my birthday, I have it free from schedules, I think,” he ended up saying, a bit off-handedly.

Hao stopped talking, though. “Your *birthday*.” He said.

“Yeah,” Hanbin finished off his own ice cream, getting up to throw away the paper. “Next week. But I have filming schedules all day and then, like, some school festival appearance. So, maybe we could go the next day.”

Hao’s eyes were somewhat both angry and amazed. “You’re having your birthday *next week*,” he said, again. “Didn’t you think I should know?”

Hanbin stood there, on his feet, feeling a bit lost. “Well, I’m sure I would have sent you the party invitation when I get to organize it,” he said, quietly. “And Matthew would have texted you telling you about whatever present they’ll try raising money for.”

“Yah,” Hao was downright offended now. “I’m here, *dating you*. And you don’t tell me it’s your birthday. Are you setting me up, Hanbin-ah,” Hanbin was at a loss for words. Dating him? What did their strategy have to do with- “Do you want me to look like the worst boyfriend ever? I *have* to, like, wish you at exactly midnight and all that shit, and you don’t even let me know in advance. Oh god, you’re,” he stopped. Hanbin couldn’t begin to reply without looking like the biggest idiot ever. “You’ve never dated anyone, right?”

Hanbin sat back down. He would go to the paper waste bin later, at this point. “Does it show that bad, am I so bad?”

Hao shook his head, and he was quick to pat him on his thigh, reassuringly. “No,” he said, quietly. “Of course you’re not bad,” he sounded sincere. “But you’re better at doing things for me than you are at letting me do them for you? Like. When’s my birthday?”

Hanbin sounded sulky as he answered, diligently, “July 25th.”

Hao laughed quietly, and he kept patting his leg. Hanbin stopped his hand, instinctively, taking it in his own. Hao

let him. "See, you knew when mine was. Why didn't you let me know about yours?" Hanbin didn't have an answer for him.

"I'm sorry," he said. Hao shook his head. Behind his own mask, Hanbin was sure he was smiling. Hao pulled him up, resuming their walk along the river.

"I'm fine with going shopping with you next week, anyway," he concluded.

Hao noticed them first. Hanbin was too busy trying to take a photo of the sunset, trying to regulate his phone's camera, which wasn't collaborating at all. Stupid technology. And then suddenly Hao walked closer to him, too close, and slid his arm under Hanbin's, effectively startling him into turning to face him. Hao was staring at him with too much intensity for it not to mean something. He was going to ask what was wrong, but Hao spoke first, slowly and in a low voice.

"Behind us," he said. "There's three girls with their phones on us," Hanbin thanked the heavens Hao was holding him, because he would have turned to check and it would have looked horrible. "And there's a grown man with a pro camera, too." A journalist? Paparazzi? He felt like there wasn't enough air around them. Hao squeezed his arm. "Keep doing what you were doing, don't mind them," he said. Easy for him to say, now all Hanbin could think about was that their fucking hangout would be posted everywhere and people would have a lot to say on how they were acting and moving and dealing with every single thing.

"Yeah," he nodded weakly. Hao kept looking at him, unrelenting. He was thinking about something, maybe about the fact that Hanbin was panicking in front of him. Maybe about how Hanbin was completely unable to deal with this kind of situation, which inherently made him very bad at their job.

"Let's take our photo," Hao said, and he took Hanbin's phone away from his hand. He piloted the both of them to have their backs to the river, and then he snapped one, two, three times, all while changing his own pose too. Hanbin felt like he was being maneuvered around, giving no actual contribution to the thing. "We're never posting these," Hao concluded. "Let them wonder what photos we've taken." Hanbin didn't understand how he could be so calm. He forced himself to take a deep breath. He reminded himself that they *needed* this publicity, even if it meant ending a nice afternoon out with a half panic attack. He told himself that if people managed to spot them on the streets it meant that they were already significantly more popular than they were at the beginning, that this crazy-ass plan was working, in some ways. But he hadn't met Hao to get a rise out of the press, today. He'd wanted to take a walk with a friend. And now he had to think about how to make it look like he was out with a boyfriend, and like he didn't mind having to think about this instead of just enjoying Hao's company like he'd wanted to.

He took one last calming breath. He disentangled his arm from Hao's and, instead, slotted their hands together. Fingers threading with each other and all. It felt like Hao stiffened a bit, before he dragged Hanbin to keep on with their walk. "How do you think they found us?" He whispered in Hao's ear, as they went on strolling. Hao looked the tiniest bit hesitant, maybe he was forcing himself not to react at their sudden proximity.

"No idea," he replied. Holding his hand was the only thing keeping Hanbin sane. If he let go, he would run away screaming, or he would turn back to yell at these people to leave them alone, to leave *him* alone, because he couldn't think, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't hear his own thought with the way his heart was hammering behind his ribcage, because this felt like there was no actual going back. Any reasonable doubt people could still have about the two of them would be destroyed by these images, as soon as someone shared them on the Internet. And, at this point, either they admitted their bosses had forced them to do this, or they accepted that everyone would assume they were really together. It felt hysterical. Hanbin had worked so hard to balance his own identity with his public role, and now it would all slip away from his grip. He would no longer have any control on how people dealt with who he was.

"Can't we lose them, now?" Hanbin forced himself to ask. Hao looked at him for what felt like forever. Two seconds, possibly. Hanbin could lose track of time in his eyes. He didn't have enough mental capacity to process it.

"I'll call us a taxi," Hao answered. "I know it's hard for you," he added. And he also ran his thumb along the back of Hanbin's hand. Hanbin's stomach did an awful thing. He had to get a grip.

"Hyung," he said, when Hao was already on his phone. Hao still turned to look at him. He never failed to do so. "Thank you." Hao shook his head. He wasn't letting go of the hand he was holding, Hanbin felt like he was on the verge of some precipice, with the same void in his stomach and the adrenaline of the fall already kicking in. If he closed his eyes, there was nothing else around him, except for the warmth of Hao's palm in his own hand.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
haobin lovestagram & couple items [a thread]

disclaimer: i might have missed something + even if we still don't have any official statement i am under the belief that 5stars hanbin and aw4ke hao are totally dating so do what you want with this info

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 1:

starting from the most recent ones. 5stars vlog from SBS studios (inkigayo stage behind). hanbin wore a baseball hat while matt "interviewed" him. the same hat was from the tourist shop where hanbin and hao shopped three months ago, from this IG post on hao's IG. they bought matching caps.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 2:

hao's ig story with his photo taken at the han river park + hanbin ig post of himself eating ice cream at the park (they were together that day, but don't spread those photos bc they were ssg content, so please stick with the real accounts)

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 3:

hao's live from his dorm, he was wearing a sweater that suspiciously resembles this other sweater hanbin was seen wearing on his own live a few days before. either it's the same one or they own the same model. cuties.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 4:

hanbin's IG story the other day featured (again) his mandarin textbook, open on "ordering at the restaurant"; later that day hao's IG story read (in korean + mandarin) "someone ordered delivery food (next time order chinese food in chinese, if you dare)".

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 5:

5stars taerae's ig post with hanbin: hanbin has sunglasses he clearly borrowed from hao.
hao's photo in this post with his sunglasses is on his IG from six months ago.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 6:

two "separate" photos of the boys at some kind of university film club. officially, hao went with seungeon, hanbin went with 5stars boys. i am fairly certain they were all together.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 7:

hao's necklace on his IG post is part of a couple set. so far, hanbin didn't show if he has the other half.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2h ago
number 8:

two complementary photos of a hongdae street on a late afternoon, posted on IG stories by the two of them. hao's story features him, a photo taken by someone (hanbin?). hanbin's story is just a photo of the scenery (the very background of hao's pic, OKAY).

Ask us one more question , Hao thought. *Just one more* . Hanbin laughed from his place on his side, the tips of his ears were red, but he was handling it all with grace. MC Nana of Show!Champion, all smiles and nice manners, was

interviewing both groups at once, and she, too, was laughing. “That was 5stars Hanbin-ssi doing the highlight choreo from Aw4ke *New Melody*, how did you enjoy it, Hao-ssi?”

Hao was quick to reply. You kinda have to be quick in these situations. It’s not like these interviews have some substance, anyway. “Ah,” he pretended to think about it for a grand total of one second, “He’s always a great dancer, our Hanbin-ah.” Hanbin, possibly dying inside if Hao had gotten to know him a bit, bumped his shoulder against Hao’s, playfully. “But, let me show you that we can hold our own honor high,” Hao concluded.

Laughter. Nana was laughing, Hanbin, too. Along Hanbin, his members pushed together in the small filming area. “Okay, okay,” Nana went on, seamlessly. “Hao-ssi, Gyuvin-ssi, show us the key points of 5stars *Midnight*’s choreography, please?”

Hao liked this feeling. He loved it, and he would chase it for the rest of his life. And if he couldn’t ever replicate it, he would forever be unaccomplished. Because he was dancing in front of the cameras, and his dance would be aired on TV, and that was incredible in itself, but this time he was standing next to Hanbin, who was also marking the same dance, and was also looking at him through the monitor in front of them and it added a hundred times to the intensity of this feeling. It was everything he could ever want, from now on. The impossible combination of going on air, to perform, with Hanbin. It was a shame they weren’t in the same company, in the same group. Maybe he could persuade the higher-ups to set up some bizarre project group just to allow them to perform together. Because he *needed* it.

“Wow,” Nana resumed her MC-ing. “Matthew-ssi, what did you think of your friends’ rendition?” Hao forced himself to focus on the reply. He was all too aware that Hanbin’s right hand was like three centimeters away from Hao’s left one. It would take nothing, to brush against his fingers. But they hadn’t discussed it. And this would go on air, for everyone to see and dissect. He just turned to look at Matthew.

“These days we’re always together everywhere,” Matthew said, with too much truth to his words. “So they must have learned all the tricks to do it perfectly,” he was smiling and he sounded happy and this was when Hanbin decided to turn back to look at Hao. Their eyes met, because, of course Hao would follow his movement even when in his peripheral vision. Hanbin’s eyes were shiny, almost teary. And he had this half-adoring expression on his face, that meant: hyung, if it weren’t for you my team wouldn’t be standing on this stage today. Hao had no idea what his own expression was like. Surely, he knew that he was thinking too many things at once. That Hanbin had no reason to be this grateful to him, it had been mutual work. That, still, he, too, was grateful to Hanbin for sticking through with this insanity. That Hanbin and his members were all talented and they didn’t need to thank anyone else for stepping on a stage they deserved to be on. That Hanbin shouldn’t look at him like that if he wanted Hao to keep the last of his sanity, because sometimes it felt like they really had a chance, like maybe Hanbin and him were on the same page. That Hao, in the end, wanted to be able to stand next to him again, and again. And again. And forever, at this point.

“Let’s introduce our next performance together, Jiwoong-ssi,” Nana’s voice cut through all this tangle.

“Yes,” Jiwoong’s happiness seeped out of his every syllable. “A fresh and bright song, perfect for a hot summer day,” Hao tuned out the rest of his speech. He prayed, again. He’d never prayed as hard as he was doing that day. He prayed that this wasn’t the last chance he would have of sharing the spotlight with Hanbin, that he would get to share a real stage with him soon. He’d never been good at praying, but he hoped his desperation reached the right destination.

janghao

> *can i tell you something*

Kim Gyu Bin

> ? *Of course.*

> *Do you want me to come to your room?*

janghao

> *no, i need the distance the chat gives me.*

Kim Gyu Bin

> *Alright.*

> *Is everything alright, though?*

janghao

> so i know you're like best friends with sung hanbin now
> but don't ever tell him what i'm about to say

Kim Gyu Bin

> Scary, hyung.
> You sure everything's alright?

janghao

> I'm fine. For real.
> But maybe in a few months you'll see me cry a bit.
> But I'll be fine, because I'm alright now, and I will be alright even then.
> I've realized that it doesn't matter if he breaks my heart. I'll have to tell him the truth anyway, when I'll be able to.

Kim Gyu Bin

> Are you saying that you think Hanbin hyung will break your heart?
> Why would he?
> He doesn't look like he'd do that intentionally.

janghao

> but he'll have to reject me.
> but i don't care, i'm fine with this.

Kim Gyu Bin

> Reject you?
> Why would he, again?
> No wait.
> Oh fuck.
> Hyung!!!!
> I have to come to your room, sorry. You're saying you like him? For real? And you think it's not mutual? I'm coming over.

To: Hanbin Sung; Hao Zhang; [8 other addresses — SEE ALL]

Object: DRAFT — NOTICE TO BE DISPATCHED ON JUNE 20TH

This is [select one] AJ ENT/ACEMUSIC,

This notice aims to clarify things after speculations and so-called scandals have arisen. Our artists Zhang Hao and Sung Hanbin have agreed to this notice themselves.

The two artists are in a relationship, which has been going on for a few months. The frequent media dispatches on this matter have urged them to clear things up, and at the same time to ask for their privacy to be respected. Neither company will tolerate any hateful comment on this subject.

Additional note:

Speaking with the two artists involved, it is clear that the trust and respect they have for each other transcends the few months they've spent together. We wish the couple a happy future.

Notes:

The next chapter is still to be written for like it's 75% so please be patient, I'm writing like my life depended on it but I also have a (part-time, not so satisfying) job to keep and alas, an adult life to maintain. So have patience, I

won't let you down. Hopefully.

Anyway, feel free to hmu whenever on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/whatifauthor>) or Retro (<https://retrospring.net/@whatifauthor>).!

Chapter 3 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/50821996/chapters/131786863>): **Part Three**

Summary:

They're not really in love. Right? Right?!

Notes:

Clown circus music started actually playing in my head multiple times as I took note of the length this chapter was reaching. However, it never stopped me.

No major TWs to add.

It's LONGER than the one before and I'm begging you to please not try to read it in one go. Then, again, if you do just don't let me know.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes ([#chapter_3_endnotes](#)).)

gunwookie small baby

> *hyung did you see the article about the hyungs?*

mother taeraesa

> *which one? there are like 28 of them and they all came out at the same time*

> *also, hanbin hyung isn't tearing his eyes away from his phone*

> *we need to get him busy somehow*

> *he can't keep reading every article and every comment*

gunwookie small baby

> *fuck.*

> *yeah sure.*

> *let me think about something.*

mother taeraesa

> *yes use your brain*

> *even if you're at school and you shouldn't be texting me*

> *but i don't care*

gunwookie small baby

> *he'll understand we're dragging him away from the phone*

> *like, instantly*

mother taeraesa

> *unless.*

gunwookie small baby

> *unless what?*

mother taeraesa

> *unless we get the both of them in the same place, so they don't have to worry about whether like they need to*

pick up the phone
> bc you know how hanbin hyung will be like “but what if hao hyung calls what if he needs to discuss the punctuation of a twitter post with me”
> so.

gunwookie small baby

> the managers won't allow it.
> like.
> you're not alone now, are you?

mother taeraesa

> no, we're not
> but i mean.....
> can't i at least try?
> i can text hao-ssi

gunwookie small baby

> yeah because i'm sure he'll be waiting to hear from you
> he won't have anything else on his mind with seven hundred articles emerging on how he's dating hanbin hyung.

mother taeraesa

> no you're right.
> alas.
> what if i make up some schedule that needs choreography?

gunwookie small baby

> that might work but it has to look legit
> ask jiwoong hyung to ask the manager to send an e-mail calling us to the dance studio
> and to idk tell everyone that we're being optioned idk for a survival shitty show like idk kingdom?? idk.

mother taeraesa

> when he finds out it was a lie he'll kill me

gunwookie small baby

> he didn't kill you at the “sorry was i supposed to be surprised” when he came out to you.
> why would he kill you now?

mother taeraesa

> YOU HAVE A DISTORTED VERSION OF THAT STORY
> anyway.
> i'm texting jiwoongie brb

gunwookie small baby

> kay
> i missed like half the lecture
> how could i miss everything in like 10 minutes top

mother taeraesa

> the mysteries of high school
> jiwoong hyung said he'll talk to the manager
> still
> i never said “am i supposed to act surprised”

gunwookie small baby

- > *not the revisionism*
- > *i was right there*
- > *unable to understand anything, but still there.*

mother taeraesa

- > *he said that he needed to tell me something*
 - > *and that he hoped i would understand*
 - > *and too many other words*
- > *and then he said "you know how last week that thing upset me too much?"*
 - > *and i said "i know"*
- > *and he said "i think it's because i will never like girls"*
 - > *and i said "yeah, that was rather clear"*
 - > *and he exploded???*

gunwookie small baby

- > *empathy really is your strong suit hyungie*
- > *!!!!*
- > *i'm bored*
- > *and i hate chemistry*
- > *anyway.*
- > *let's get a smoothie after school?*

mother taeraesa

- > *i know you have no respect for me as your hyung but i'm not actually in school with you*
 - > *so*

gunwookie small baby

- > *you're evil*
- > *worst hyung i have in this group*

mother taeraesa

- > *i accept this*
- > *i know my competition*

gunwookie small baby

- > *while you're at home doing nothing, will you look up the solutions for this?*
- > *[gunwookie small baby sent a photo]*

mother taeraesa

- > *i won't be there to take exams for you.*
 - > *do it yourself.*
 - > *bye.*

It was, to put it simply, insane. Everyone he'd ever met in his life was texting him, apparently. And he'd also made the mistake of keeping his notifications active for the group's official SNS, so it was literally like his phone was being flooded on all fronts. Hanbin tried putting it away, he did. However, at the next vibration, he picked it up again. It was another KaTalk message, this time it came from his sister. He didn't really want to open any messages, but she was one of the kindest people in his life. She might help him. He tapped on her notification.

bestest (and only) sibling

> yo.

> *don't overthink it, okay? focus on the good side.*

> *like, now you won't ever have to worry about having to come out again*

> *isn't that relaxing?*

He wanted to reply that that was one good way of looking at it, but his display was taken over by someone calling him. Jiwoong. "Hyung," he picked up immediately.

"Taerae wanted me to lie to you," he started. Boy, what a beginning. Hanbin turned to his right, where Taerae was lying on the couch with his headphones on and his phone in his hands.

"What?" Hanbin got up to his feet, walking the small distance between where he'd been sitting and where Taerae was. He tapped on his shoulder.

"Yeah, we're all kinda worried because you haven't stopped trying to read every single comment about the announcement since yesterday," noble reason, not a noble enough subterfuge. He flicked Taerae's forehead with his finger. His whine and his surprised face were almost funny. Almost. "So he wanted me to fake some practice. I honestly tried, but I failed." Taerae was now clearly listening in on his phone call. He might as well turn the speaker on.

"It's alright," he lied. "I'm just a control freak, you all know." This wasn't a lie. But it was becoming clear that he couldn't keep just *everything* under control. Also, he couldn't be expected to read *all* that people were saying. They had too much to say. And it wasn't even fair.

"Stop lying," Jiwoong said. "And stop being on your phone."

"So can I hang up on you?" He kinda wished he could, because this was really, really, too much. Maybe he could also hang up on everything else, escape to the mountains and forget all about this.

Jiwoong laughed on the other end. "Come to the company, we can set something up, like we can sing some stupid silly songs in the studio. Get our minds off this for a while?"

He thought about it. Taerae's worried gaze was on him. He thought about the scenario Jiwoong had just described. It didn't sound bad. But. What if, while he was there playing around, something tragic happened? What if this announcement resulted in, like, a monetary breakdown of their company? What if their stocks fell? What if his mom changed her mind about all this and needed to call him to lament the fact that her son was on the news for dating a man? What if Hao called? Because, while everyone and their mothers had texted him, Hao hadn't. "Have you heard from Hao?" He ended up asking. "Or, not even Hao hyung strictly. I don't know, maybe from Quanrui. Or Gyuvin. Or Seungeon. Anyone."

Jiwoong was mercifully quick to answer. "I talked to Gyuvin, this morning," why did it feel like betrayal? Why hadn't they contacted Hanbin, but Jiwoong? "They've been on distracting Hao duty since yesterday." Hanbin wondered if Hao was in his same mental state.

"I'm coming," he said. "But on one condition."

Taerae sighed on his side. Jiwoong, though, sounded completely at ease when he asked: "Sure, what do you need?"

Hanbin exhaled. "Get me Hao on the phone," he said.

It felt like he was negotiating something really scary and important. Jiwoong had given him his phone, but had demanded he stayed in the same room. Like Hanbin was going to run away with his phone and plan some kind of escape with Hao. Insane. But it was more or less fine. Because on the other end of the line, now, speaking on Gyuvin's phone, was Hao.

"I wanted to call you," he'd said as soon as he'd picked up, before Hanbin even managed to tell him it was him speaking. "But these fuckers have been acting like I'm some kid of criminal."

Hanbin had laughed. It had possibly been his first laugh since that fucking notice had been posted. "How are you?"

"I'm perfectly okay," Hao said. He sounded like he meant it. "My mother said you're handsome, by the way. Seungeon stole my phone after I tried to insult a journalist who wrote that we're a disgrace to the nation's good name. What even is the nation's good name? Which nation, also? I'm not even fucking Korean."

Hanbin had read that article. He hadn't felt rage, just a heavy weight on his stomach. He was letting down so many people's expectations. He was smiling, though. "What were you going to tell him?"

"Thanks for asking," Hao said. Hanbin could very well imagine how his face looked as he said this. His eyes

round, a flick of his left eyebrow, a slight pout before he started speaking again. “I would have told him that the nation’s good reputation as of now is completely based on the export of technology, on some car industries and on entertainment. And I don’t think we bring disgrace to the entertainment industry, in the slightest. If anything, we provide so much entertainment that even he felt the need to jump on the bandwagon because he couldn’t stand not saying anything on a topic that is clearly entertaining a lot of people. Also, if he thinks the highest percentage of entertainers is straight, well, I got news-” he stopped mid sentence. “Are you *laughing* ?”

“I’m sorry,” Hanbin could only say, trying to catch his breath. “It’s just,” he didn’t even know what to say. “You would’ve started beef with him, for real? With all the care you have on PR?”

“Fuck PR,” Hao sounded like he was also holding back laughter, now. “Like, I care about making a good impression but I can’t be blind to blatant discrimination. It’s just homophobic and they need to come up with better excuses other than their own bigotry.”

“Many comments are supportive,” Hanbin said. He’d read too many negative comments, but there was no denying that most of them had been nice to them. Some had even tried to get back at the negative ones.

“They better be,” Hao rebuked. “I’ll be clear from now on, I don’t want any fans who aren’t *supportive* . Let the rest of them burn.”

Hanbin wanted to have a tenth of his confidence. He couldn’t begin to feel like he didn’t owe apologies to all the people who were disappointed right now. “Yeah,” he said, weakly.

“Hanbin-ah,” Hao’s tone had shifted. Hanbin didn’t want pity from him. He didn’t want pity from anyone. “I’m happy you called me,” he said, instead.

“Oh,” he caught Jiwoong’s gaze. He was staring at him, almost like he didn’t want Hanbin to notice he was staring, while still being obvious about it. “I wanted to know if you were okay. I’d texted but, again, Seungeon has your phone, so you didn’t reply.”

Hao laughed softly. “I *am* okay,” Hao repeated. “And I hope you’ll be okay, too.” Hanbin didn’t even pretend that he was okay *now* , because it must have been clear to anyone just how upset he was.

“I’ll be fine,” he said. He believed it. “Can you please not fight any journalist and get your phone back, hyung?”

Hao laughed louder. He coughed a bit. “I’ll try my best,” he said. “Will you stop trying to read all of Twitter and all of Insta, too?”

Hanbin smiled. “Yes,” he promised. He looked at Jiwoong again, he was reading something on the screen of the computer, now. “Thanks for cheering me up.”

“Yah,” Hao must be squinting his eyes menacingly now. “It’s my contractual duty as the best fake boyfriend in all the Republic of Korea,” he said.

“God forbid you don’t uphold this country’s good name,” Hanbin replied instantly. Hao broke out in laughter. “I should go,” he didn’t know why his tone dropped.

“Mh,” Hao agreed. “I think Gyuvin wants his phone back, too.” Hanbin nodded, perfectly conscious that Hao wouldn’t see him, and perfectly hopeful that he would imagine he was nodding.

“Okay,” he said.

“Bye,” Hao wasn’t hanging up, anyway. Hanbin brought the phone away from his ear. He closed the call.

Jiwoong looked at him for five whole seconds, studied his face and then he said: “I think we’re collectively underestimating the impact you two have on each other,” then he shrugged. “Whatever. Let’s try singing this song. I want to do a cover later on and I need your input now.”

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2 days ago

i hope they were really fine with making it known right now tho

sometimes it feels like all the “scandals” all the paparazzi all the articles pressured them a bit too much

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2 days ago

like, i wouldn’t be very comfortable with announcing a “big” relationship to the world just a few months in idk

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2 days ago

i mean, i’m talking about months bc the notice spoke about “a few months” maybe it’s longer idk

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2 days ago

WAIT

did it really start with that tiktok???????????

anyWAY

i hope they were fine with the timing of the notice.

Hao had known this would have to happen. They'd been briefed many times. Too many, to the point that he'd started believing that Dr. Ji and Mr. Lee might think that they were stupid. *Every one of your outings will be photographed*, they'd said. Okay, Hao had thought. But, no, apparently they needed to hear that seven more times. On some levels, he wondered why the press would care about them that much. The hype of the "gay idols whose company don't even hate them" should die out soon, in his opinion. And, while the continued attention meant that their fame kept rising — with more subscribers to all their platforms and, somehow, more people buying their merch and albums —, he still couldn't understand why newspaper editors would want to write their fifteenth article on Hao and Hanbin going for ice cream together in a row. How didn't that become old news quickly?

His paranoid side thought that, maybe, they just wanted to catch them failing. Either admitting that it was all staged, or exploding under the pressure of this new, weird title of "same-sex sweethearts". Maybe they hoped to catch them fighting with each other. Or maybe they wanted to stalk them to catch them with their real girlfriends, or boyfriends. Just to be able to say *see, all this noise and it wasn't even that worrisome, just another money trap*. On a different level, though, he genuinely believed that they made for such novel news material that the news outlets were sincerely curious about them. Maybe the general public had no idea what a famous couple could do in their free time, if they weren't traditionally combined.

Anyway, Dr. Ji's text didn't surprise him in the slightest. It was a Wednesday, late afternoon, he'd just finished his gym session — something he hated deeply, but the utility of which he understood — and he was about to catch a taxi back to his dorm. Dr. Ji changed his plans. Somehow, she'd become the direct manager of their PR stunt. She didn't trust anyone else to do the job correctly, and only ever organized meetings with her, Mr. Lee, the two of them and another employee of hers, a young woman with a degree in communication studies and a terrifying set of split ends. Hao wished she just cut her hair. He might go as far as to tell her the next time he saw her. It bothered him too much.

Ji A Ra CEO AJ

> *Hao-ssi.*

> *You're going to the cinema. Got the tickets for you, wait for Hanbin-ssi at his dorm. Catch taxi together.*

jjang hao

> *Got it.*

> *[draft: are we getting some sponsorship from a cinema franchise, because like we're seeing a movie every week]*

It wasn't like Hao minded seeing Hanbin, it wasn't even like he minded going to the cinema with Hanbin. They'd seen plenty of movies together at this point, just. Ji Ara should get more creative.

"What movie are we watching?" Hao was certain Hanbin had the tickets. He was also certain he wasn't really keen on watching yet another movie. Sure, Hanbin had made a great point, when Hao had complained about *all these movies*: other people could see them while at the cinema. Not just journalists, but normal people, who'd gone to the cinema by themselves. Which also meant that they had to put out an all-round performance. That he was supposed to act like Hanbin's lover even *while* watching the movie.

"Indiana Jones something something," Hanbin read on the tickets.

"There's a new Indiana Jones movie?" Hao couldn't believe it. "Like, is he even still alive?"

Hanbin's eyes went wide, as if he'd asked something extremely rude. "Hyung," he laughed. "I know, I'm not really excited either."

“Will Ji Ara send us to watch *Barbie* too, next month?” Hao kinda hoped she did, to be fair. *That* would be fun. And he also hoped that the news picked up on that, because imagine what an aneurysm-inducing combo that’d be: them — the royal couple of debatable pairings — and a movie so women-centered.

“If she doesn’t, let’s go on our own,” Hanbin must share his same vision. Sometimes, Hao thought himself too lucky to have found Hanbin as a partner. They were too much of a good match. What god was he supposed to be thanking for the fact that he’d let him meet Hanbin?

The movie was awful. And Hanbin kept trying to shush him as he made stupid, silly comments during the whole duration of the movie, but to no avail. “I’d be a better screenwriter than these ones,” Hao said, after the first half of the movie. “Don’t you think?”

Hanbin must be such a sucker for rules that the idea of speaking in a movie theater must have made his blood freeze in his veins. He took a lot of time to reply. Hao could barely look at him like this, only the silhouette of his face was visible in the dark of the room. Whenever the screen lit up with some outside shot, Hao enjoyed looking at his face more than at the silver screen. Yet another testimony to how bad the plot was, because, in any other circumstance, he would have at least pretended to still have some dignity left. “Mh,” Hanbin said, after a while. And then. “But you’re just full of yourself, too.”

Hao fought against himself not to laugh. He pinched Hanbin’s arm, out of spite. “You’re never nice to me,” he whispered back.

Hanbin turned to look at him, and threw him a disbelieving look. “Shut up,” he mouthed. Hao wished he had no responsibility to anyone. He wished he could just kiss him the way he wanted to. He blinked this unwise idea away.

“You’re too strict, Sung Hanbin,” he said, just to get the last word. His heart was still beating too fast in his ribcage. There wasn’t any point in dwelling over his heart’s stupid wishes, anyway. He let himself relax against the backrest, as he started to think about which photos of their completely non-spontaneous date would be more impactful on Instagram. There was a thin line they shouldn’t cross. They were supposed to still be professional idols, after all. So, he couldn’t snap the photo he would have liked to, Hanbin in the soft light of the movie, because no one should take photos while the film was playing, blah, blah. Any formal picture of them in the foyer, too, was out of question. Snapping the tickets was too banal, the movie poster, too. Jesus, this was why Ji Ara should pick better options for their dates, who can take decent photos at the movies?

Trendy couple at the movies. Zhang Hao and Sung Hanbin’s IG photos thrill fans all over the world.

On Wednesday, July 5th, the fan-favorite couple hit the theater again, to attend a screening of Indiana Jones . As they’re prone to do quite often, whenever they’re together, and as they’ve always done for months, an IG post followed their outing. 5stars Hanbin shared a photo of himself standing in line to buy popcorn, turning to his back as if called by someone else (Hao, we’re thinking). Fans have been calling it a perfect “boyfriend shot”, without holding back on how happy they are that he doesn’t hide his relationship status. A few hours later, Aw4ke Hao shared a different photo, this time of him. The photo was way less flattering, as it showed him dozing off on the cinema’s padded seat. His caption lamented the lack of photography skills on who took it. The second photo on the set, however, was way prettier, and showed his profile against the city lights from the inside of a city taxi. “Get yourself a guy that can do both” was one of the most commented expressions.

user109507 commented:

*they’re so clearly enjoying stirring fans’ reaction i don’t even know what to say lol
i’m not calling them fake, mind me. i believe they’re not entirely orchestrated, but you won’t make me believe there’s not something staged in how much of this relationship they feed to us.*

user976676 commented:

it’s amazing how hao doesn’t waste any given chance to make fun of hanbin. like, he didn’t have to make himself look “bad” in that sleeping photo, but he did it just to dig at his man. he’s,,,,,

user629852 commented:

there's nothing worth saying about these two. the more they end up on the news, the more they'll keep posting their "activities". and, mind you, they're clearly trying to further some lgbt bullshit propaganda, with all these photos trying to show how they do "normal" things.

user981758 commented:

can y'all please stop digging at these two boys? they're in love and they can't even post the things they do together without someone being like "gay propaganda hur hur" it's not like they're going round making people gay, they're just living their fucking life.

user715925 commented:

*they should have just kept making music without sharing the things they do together. i don't give a shit who f*cks whom.*

user155554 commented:

their photos are perfectly PG-rated, yet somehow there's still people being like "why do lgbtq+ people have to sexualize everythinggggg" just say you hate us and go.

user876155 commented:

i wish they'd never announced they're gay. now i can't stan either of them.

user899351 commented:

we always complain that there's no representation in the industry, but when someone bravely steps up to be true to themselves, then they're met with "go back into the closet", that's all there's wrong in the world.

user741653 commented:

i was at the same Indiana Jones screening as them. they're really nice. i greeted them when the movie was over, and they said hi really politely.

they were seated in the row right in front of me, and they really give off very genuine vibes. hanbin must be a very patient person in real life, while hao is a very playful man. they spent the whole time before the movie started chatting very animatedly, and, if they hadn't already confirmed their relationship the other week, i would have been sold on it being "true" from how i saw them today.

i already knew them from before they started sharing their dates, but i was reluctant to believe they were actually dating. the notice made me sit there and think about how little a fan can know about her idols, even when you've known them since their debut.

still, seeing them today made me more sure about the fact that they're taking care of each other in a very clear way, and i'm sincerely happy that they have each other through this, also because they must be reading some of the awful comments they're getting.

PS: stop replying to this by telling me i saw them as "my" boyfriends, i am not that kind of fan.

Edit: i shouldn't be explaining myself to you, but to give you the full picture: i am a girl, and i am dating another girl. so. stop calling me out for "accepting it because they wouldn't date you anyway". i wouldn't date them either: they're men.

Hanbin lost count of the days. There was too much to do, and there was too little time to waste it on counting how many days had gone by since his name had appeared on a myriad of websites along Hao's. They were rushed everywhere, from one rehearsal for a summer music festival to the stage to a photo OP, to an interview with a magazine, to an interview with foreign YouTube creators, to another photo shoot, and then the company had started making them film individual vlogs and contents, and Matthew was maybe going to host a variety show of his own. This was, admittedly, the life they'd dreamt of: fame came with a price, and, clearly, the price included giving up free time.

The timetables they received from the company were insane, they slept too little and had almost no time to catch

up with families and friends from outside the group. Somehow, but also kind of naturally, Hanbin's schedule was always structured in such a way to allow him to see Hao two or three times a week. Most of the time, they weren't alone. Some of the other members also tagged along, because they'd grown to be friends and — right now — this was one of the few chances at a normal social life, at winding down with friends in front of a can of beer.

"We were interviewed by this American girl," Gyuvin was saying. He was also munching on a hot dog which made it rather hard to understand what he was actually saying. "And she was extra nice to us, but she was also kind of confused as to why we blew up after so many years from our debut." Hanbin was listening attentively. He was also conscious that, at a certain point during this evening, he would be photographed by some of the other clients of this bar or by some paparazzi who'd been ticked off by fans or by the companies themselves. It was why he'd elected to sit next to Hao, who was currently texting with Kuanjui, without listening to anything at all.

"And did you tell her the truth?" Gunwook asked, as he played a bit with the half-empty glass in front of him. He never drank much, he claimed he was too young to drink alcohol in large amounts. One time he'd launched himself in a lengthy explanation of why drinking alcohol before you're twenty can result in permanent brain damage. Taerae had claimed that this information was completely made up, or it was hidden to the general public because otherwise half the family expenses in this country would drop and the economy would collapse. Jiwoong had ended up lamenting that they had too much free time, if they had time to go read on all this. Now, they kinda wished they'd enjoyed their free time more.

"Sure," Gyuvin said. He laughed. "No, of course we didn't. We just said that the public loved our new music and we were offered lots of new chances. Speaking of which," Hanbin turned his focus completely to him. "I'm in the talks for a modeling campaign."

Hanbin clapped him on his shoulders immediately. "That's *so* great?" He said. He couldn't believe it, his Gyuvin getting to be a model! Best news of the week, by far. "With a brand? Like, will you take part in the brand campaign?"

"Yes!" Gyuvin sounded, rightfully, excited. "It's not high fashion, it's a sports brand, an Asian one, but it's a big step nonetheless. I mean, we all know I'll be a Westwood ambassador sooner or later, but we all have to start somewhere."

"Why Westwood, hyung?" Gunwook was too curious for his own good, because now they would have to withstand Gyuvin's monologue on why Vivienne Westwood had *changed* the fashion industry and shaped culture itself. Hanbin had been through this at least three other times. He tried to listen, again, but his mind was drifting. He had to check a few things for tomorrow's performances, once he got back to the dorm. Like, he was pretty sure he'd lost one of the earrings in his bag, and he always forgot to check. But, at the same time, he should also make sure that he took all his vitamins, because he'd skipped them the day before and they wouldn't be of much use if he-

"Bin-ah," Hao's whisper brought him back to the bar. "Jui says hi, he insists I should report it to you," he sounded the tiniest bit exasperated.

"Tell him hi, too, then," Hanbin whispered back. Hao didn't look convinced. "And tell him that you've been on the phone all night instead of talking to us," he added.

"He broke up with-" Hao had already explained. Kuanjui had given up on one of the two guys he was alternating between, and now the one he'd picked had broken up with him. Clearly, an emergency Hao had to deal with. Hanbin, sometimes, wished he could be more a part of this. But he had no right to, and he knew that. He knew he couldn't fit himself into such a solid, beautiful, friendship as theirs, and he knew that he had no reason to ask them to include him. "Wait," Hao looked at him with wide eyes. "Are you jealous?"

Hanbin wasn't. At all. Of course, he wasn't jealous. What was there to be jealous of? Kuanjui had always been Hao's best friend, a title he himself could never aim to reach. And he didn't even want to be Hao's best friend, if he was honest. Not his goal, never his goal. As for the other implication of jealousy, he wasn't allowed to be jealous. He wasn't really dating Hao, which meant he had no right to have any kind of feelings towards him. So: not jealous.

"I'm just wondering," he admitted, though. "If I'm not holding you back." Because maybe Hao would have wanted to live more like Kuanjui did. Hanbin had very little idea of what Hao used to be up to before this arrangement began. Maybe he used to be freer, maybe he needed that back. They'd been keeping this pretense up for three months already, and they didn't know how much longer it would last. Hanbin was sure it might be heavy to uphold if one led a very different lifestyle. Which would be fine. Everyone was free to do what they wanted.

Hao frowned. "Holding me back?" He'd dropped the conversation with Kuanjui completely, and he was fully focused on Hanbin. It was a bit breathtaking, whenever he focused the whole intensity of his stare on Hanbin.

“Like,” Hanbin swallowed his own spit. The only two drops in his mouth. “If you, too, wanted to date someone.” Hao didn’t move, nothing on his face moved. “Or, I don’t know, just meet someone. Occasionally.”

Hao looked at him up and down, there was a stiffness to his jaw. “I agreed to this, didn’t I?” Hao waited for him to nod. “And I take my job seriously, Hanbin-ah.” He didn’t mean to insult him, so why was Hao upset, now?

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he said. “I just wondered if it feels caging for you, to be stuck with me. Maybe you’d like to—” get with someone, he would’ve said. Their performance was only that: performance. If Hao needed intimacy with someone, then he was probably unhappy. Not that Hanbin usually thought about this. Not that Hanbin had felt the need to seek someone out, either. But he’d never really felt it, to be fair. He’d always dreamed of a much more romantic way to meet someone, rather than loveless one-night-stands with people. Somehow, he’d always invested all in his job, and nothing in love. But, surely, Hao was different. Hao was smarter, Hao knew more.

“I’d like for you not to spit nonsense,” Hao replied, hastily. “It’s not like, just because my friend has a roster of lovers, I’m the same as him.”

“It would still be okay,” Hanbin said. “I wasn’t trying to judge.”

“Oh my *god*,” Hao’s whisper was loud. It startled the others, too. “I know it’s okay. I’m just saying: I don’t feel trapped. I’m not used to a busy life in that sense, alright?” Hanbin nodded, as the conversation between Gunwook and Gyuvon restarted, on his side.

Hao was still looking at him insistently. “Okay,” he said. Hao didn’t let up with his stare, until Hanbin sighed and smiled at him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you. I’d like to know more about how you feel, though.”

Hao looked away, finally. He picked up his phone, left on the table. “Take a photo with me, we’re replying to Jui.” And that was it. Fight resolved. Apparently. Was it even a fight? Was that the first time they’d fought?

Kuanjuiii

> *if you were less of a coward you’d have asked him to satisfy your needs too.*

> *iywim*

janghao

> *he’s my colleague!*

> *you’re a pervert.*

> *i’m no longer friends with you.*

Kuanjuiii

> *like you don’t want him that way too.*

janghao

> *me liking him has nothing to do with me making unsolicited advances on him.*

> *and it was sweet that he worried.*

Kuanjuiii

> *i don’t like this version of you that is all sugary and sweet*

> *i want my best friend back*

janghao

> *when was i any different*

Kuanjuiii

> *you used to admit you wanted to fuck hot guys at least.*

> *now you’re actively sublimating this side of yourself.*

janghao

> *HE’S MY COLLEAGUE.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *Whom you're in love with!!!!*
- > *It's not like love cancels hotness btw!*

janghao

- > *i'm not in love with anyone.*
- > *hanbin is hot, fine. and i like him. that's the extent of this situation.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *and the whole world thinks you're dating him*
- > *i think you forgot the most relevant thing.*

janghao

- > *ha ha ha ha*
- > *he's hot, i like him, the world knows we're a couple, but we're not, so i'm not really supposed to like him, or find him hot. so, that's the full extent of this.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *it'd be so easy for you to solve this situation in your favor.*
- > *why don't you pull a move on him?*

janghao

- > *i swear you're the dumbest person i know.*
- > *I HAVE TO WORK WITH HIM.*
- > *i can't do anything else beside what's in the job description.*
 - > *and i don't want to, either.*
 - > *i like the balance we have.*
- > *when we're no longer under this contract, i'll try.*
 - > *don't ask about this anymore.*
 - > *please.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *I just think you're wasting time.*
- > *But fine.*
- > *I'll stop.*

Hao was honestly glad they managed to get interviewed together again. He was just a little less glad that every time it felt like everyone was staring at them, hoping to catch the new detail that would make it onto the news. He felt stripped naked in front of these people who knew nothing of him. And, sure, maybe it was supposed to feel like this when you're famous, but maybe it had also been a mistake, getting famous by way of a PR relationship. Everyone at this radio station, it seemed, was on their case. Maybe except for the host, who was an idol himself and who looked like he could care less about gossip and was just trying to chat with Hanbin about his latest performances. "Your group has many talented vocalists," he was saying. And Hanbin would just dismiss his own vocal ability just to uplift Taerae's, Hao was sure of it. He'd seen it happen too many times. Just like when he would dismiss his dancing, to compliment Gunwook's. Or when he would change the topic in its entirety to say wonders about Jiwoong's sweet character and his remarkable attitude for leadership. Or when he would drag Matthew across the room, in front of the camera, just to have him speak a different language every time. He was like that. He wanted to share the spotlight.

"You're lucky, Hao-ssi," an executive from the radio station addressed him. She was tall, for a woman, and she was also observing Hanbin on the other side of the glass panel.

Hao held back a tired sigh. Sure, he was lucky to be "dating" Hanbin. Everyone would be lucky to date Hanbin,

what a wonderful man Hanbin was. How incredible Hanbin made his life, they were so lucky to have found each other. All of these things, he'd said a thousand times. In live broadcasts, in TV shows, in written interviews. They were unmistakably in love, on paper, on video, on radio. "Mh," he agreed, loosely. "He's great," he huffed a laugh. The worst thing about this? It wasn't an effort for him to say any of this. He wasn't playing a part. Not anymore, maybe he never had.

"Oh, I'm sure," the exec said, and Hao turned to her, curious, because her tone was unusual. Usually, people asked more about Hanbin. How did they meet? What did their managers say? Were all the members really okay with it? "But I meant that you're lucky because you get to live fully as yourselves, and it's a rare blessing within this industry, you know?"

Oh . Well. That was one of the saddest sides of this affair. Others would have given everything they had to be doing what the two of them were doing as a pretense. Many others had to keep a lot of things to themselves, while they walked with their heads held high — Hao, mainly, because Hanbin was often worried. "I'm grateful," he said. "I know it's a blessing," he thought about all the worst comments he'd read online. "Honestly, I wouldn't have done it on my own."

She hummed her assent, a bit lost in thought. "Well, I'm sure it's nice to know you always have someone in your corner."

Hao turned back to look at Hanbin, who was still talking to the radio host, sporting a big smile, with the tip of his ears red. "Do you think," he found himself asking, before he really thought it out. "Do you think we'll survive this media circus around us?"

She laughed out loud. He looked at her again. She looked much prettier now that she was smiling, younger. "Hao-ssi, you have to believe in your relationship," she said. "I know you're both young, and things look heavy, and the future looks insurmountable. But I've seen my share of famous couples, both the ones everyone knows about and the secret ones. You'll be fine. You're solid. And you know what makes me say so?"

Hao wasn't going to stop now. "What, noona?"

"You're friends," Hao's breath stopped in his chest. Had she found them out? "You're friends first, and lovers second. I saw the two of you talk to each other," his heart was beating a bit too fast. "And you'll be fine. Trust an old witch like me."

Hao nodded. The director signaled him to go inside the recording booth. He watched as Hanbin sat, as he turned to find Hao behind the glass, as she smiled at Hao, almost childishly, with his gums showing and his eyes crinkling up. "Thank you," he said to her. "I mean it."

There was so much content about them on the web. And there was no way that Hanbin managed to escape it whenever he opened his social media apps. There were the news items that the company also made sure to share, so that they could check for any improper element. But then, there was an insane amount of videos and clips shared and re-interpreted by fans. He tried not to dwell too much on it, but it wasn't easy. Not when it made him wonder how much control he had left on the very things he did. Sometimes, in fact, there were too many things that he didn't remember doing. And yet, there they were, on TikTok playing on repeat in front of him. Him reaching for Hao's hands completely mindlessly on the latest radio interview, Hao saying something and him immediately blushing up to his roots, them waiting for a car in front of the broadcasting station and Hao putting his chin on Hanbin's shoulder, tired of waiting. This was all from the same day. And all the other times it was the same. Every action they did, every single thing they did, every move, every stare. Hanbin was beginning to question how much of that was unwitting. How much of the gentle touches he shared with Hao in public were deliberate — on both parts — , a way to stir up this very content, and how much was something that escaped their control. Because he was sure that he didn't consciously decide to do *everything* . Sometimes, yes, he thought about it, thought about just how to angle his head in Hao's direction. Other times, though, he had no memory of everything that wasn't whatever Hao had been saying or doing.

There were photos of them sitting unnecessarily close in front of an art gallery that sent Hanbin in a brain fever every time he saw them. They'd been waiting for Matthew, Quanrui and Jiwoong to come out of the gallery. They'd been on their feet for hours, and they'd elected to sit down. Hao had been telling a story about when Quanrui had spread paint all over the kitchen counter, and Hanbin had found it extremely funny, because Quanrui had the vibe of the most sophisticated person to ever walk the Earth, but he always figured in the others' stories as the clumsiest roommate.

Hanbin remembered that he'd gotten a call from his friends from the dance studio, inviting him to a jam session that weekend. He remembered discussing with Hao whether their joint schedules would allow that, he remembered Hao saying he would just join the jam session. "It'll do me good," he'd said. "It's for professionals," Hanbin had replied, with a smirk that meant that Hao would be suited for it, but he wouldn't let him have it easy just because they were believed to be dating. Hao had scoffed, "Like you're any better than I am." Hanbin was, they both knew it. But they'd laughed at the stupid exchange they'd just had.

So, this was what he remembered. But the photos told a different story. The photos showed them, half leaning on the other, with their hands entwined on top of Hao's thigh. Hanbin was also shown carrying both their bags, which then lay on his left while they were sitting on the bench. Hanbin was captured looking at Hao in his eyes (possibly this was the exchange about the jam session) with an expression he'd never seen on his own face. It made him a bit sick to the stomach. Making it somewhat worse, there were thousands of comments dissecting every single detail. They all mostly praised him for being "the perfect boyfriend", which might be nice. If he was actually Hao's boyfriend. He felt fake. He felt like a liar. He felt like he was a horrible person. People were genuinely happy for them and they kept lying to everyone's face just like that.

"Stop obsessing over those pictures," Matthew took his phone away from his hands. "I need your opinion on something more relevant than your blindness." Why were they always so rude with him?

"What is it?" He made space for Matthew to sit on his mattress.

"Huh," Matthew smiled. "So," he smiled a bit shily. "My sister's visiting soon, remember?" Yeah, Hanbin remembered. "She wants us to go to dinner all together, like, the five of us, her, her boyfriend, as usual. The same thing as always." Hanbin waited for Matthew to go on. Because this wasn't the relevant part of his question, clearly. "Should I also, like, set something up without you guys?"

Hanbin felt a smile grow on his face, and, before he knew it he was laughing in full force. "Yes," he said. Matthew was still looking at him with some degree of apprehension. "I mean, if you're ready to take it to a higher step or something."

Matthew made a face. "It's just," he started. "I mean. Hyung would be happy." Of course, Jiwoong would be extra happy. Matthew's family? A lunch with them and him? Practically a marriage proposal, to his eyes. He would be eager.

"And you?" He still asked, because Matthew still looked hesitant, and his answer hadn't been quite straightforward.

He looked at Hanbin, "I don't know." Okay. Hanbin started thinking about strategies not to bring his indecision up without upsetting him even more. "Like, it feels like a *big* step. It's one thing to be going out with him every once in a while, but when my sister's met him, then it's done, no going back."

"Do you plan on going back soon?" Hanbin asked. If he knew Matthew — and he thought he did — there was very little chance that they decided to call it off now. But he had to find out for himself.

Matthew looked away. "We can't fuck it up," he said, in English. "Like, that's scary. It's the first time we're a bit more famous and I don't want to make any rash decision high on the enthusiasm of something going well." Had he always been such a pessimist?

Hanbin patted him softly on his head, his hair tangling a bit between his fingers. "Media attention is fleeting," Hanbin said. He hoped it was true for himself, too. "You can pick whether you want to wait it out, or you want to live without worrying because it'll pass anyway."

Matthew was looking at him with an exasperated expression. "You're not helping," he complained. "At all."

Hanbin laughed. "I can't make this decision for you, though," Hanbin said. Matthew groaned. "You have time to figure it out," he added. "And, we're actually going to have to discuss a lot more stuff. Like, the stylists have sent a lot of stuff to check out."

"Clothes?" Matthew enquired. Hanbin nodded. "Oh, I'll get Taerae, we have to get out fashionista to be fully able to decide."

Taerae, studying in the kitchen, was dragged to the bedroom among a lot of protests and complaints that his grades would drop because of this. He cheered up when they included the remaining two members, turning a boring ass evening in a complete fashion show. Gunwook was having the time of his life, and there was no one who wasn't laughing. Hanbin took too many videos, something his phone storage would soon lament. When they finished putting everything back inside the boxes, except for the few items they'd elected to keep, it was later than two AM. No one pointed it out, and no one felt like expressing how the following morning they would be expected to be rehearsing at seven thirty. A problem for the 5stars of tomorrow. Today.

hanbinsung
> [*hanbinsung sent a video*]

Hao Ge

> *did i miss out on the most fun night at your dorm?*
> *you should have invited me*

hanbinsung
> *it wasn't planned tbh*

Hao Ge

> *oh you better make it up to me, sung hanbin.*

hanbinsung
> *how?*
> *i'll do it.*

Hao Ge

> *buy me dessert.*
> *yogurt.*

hanbinsung
> *is yogurt all you need?*
> *thought you'd be more high maintenance hyung*

Hao Ge

> *now you're pushing your luck, kid.*

hanbinsung
> *i'll buy you yogurt!*
> *by all means!*
> *good night!!*

Hao Ge

> *night binbinah*

Taerae looked like he had something to say to Hao. Or, at least, that was the vibe Hao was getting from him, as he was alternating looks in his direction. "What?" He gave up, after a few minutes of this. Taerae made a show of closing his textbook and walking to the couch where Hao was sitting, in 5stars' dorm.

"You do know Hanbin hyung isn't coming home for at least another hour, right?" Taerae said. Because it wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"I do," Hao said, easily. "I know he's filming some dance content with Gunwook at the company studio. And I also know he told me to wait for him here." That was exactly how it had played out, Hao wasn't hiding any part of it.

"It's almost midnight, hyung," Taerae pushed it further. "I don't think you'll manage to go out and be photographed tonight, you should go home. I'll make sure to tell him you visited, but they're running late, he won't resent you for leaving early." Hao had the distinct impression that Taerae was trying to get him to leave. Actively.

"We weren't going to have paparazzi tonight," Hao said, as it was the only thing that came to mind that he could actually say. The only alternative would be: *I was invited, I can stay as much as I like*, but that would be straight-up rude. And he didn't want to get on Taerae's wrong side either. He was a good friend to Hanbin.

"So why are you here?" Taerae was direct. He always was, he had good manners, but, within them, he didn't really

care whether people would be offended by his words. Hao focused his eyes on the pinkish rug that coated the wooden floor of this flat, right between the couch and a coffee table that was crowded with too many mismatched things, reflections of the inhabitants of the place. Gunwook had left his glasses there, Matthew's comic books were stacked under Taerae's game cases.

"We didn't have any other free time these days but this," Hao said, which was true, but maybe it was *too much* true. Taerae sat down on the couch, next to Hao but not quite near to him. He looked like he was considering what Hao had said from a variety of points of view, before he spoke again.

"Not that I dislike you," he said, which was a weird way to start a sentence, if he didn't mean to say something that would make Hao think that he did dislike him. "Or that I mind you being here, but you're not truly dating each other. So, like, if you go five days without seeing each other, is that really a problem? Also, I know couples where they don't see each other for way longer and they're fine." Hao tried to say something, but Taerae wasn't finished. "I mean, I know you know you're not really dating. Unless I missed something. Did I? Miss something?"

Hao was frozen on the spot. What would Taerae have missed? Didn't he trust that his friend, Hanbin, told him the important things in his life? "What?" Hao sounded too shaken up. Like a guilty child caught with his hands still dirty. "Nothing happened," he added. "You didn't miss anything."

Taerae raised one of his perfect eyebrows. Seriously, he had great eyebrows, maybe he should ask who did them for him, because they were- "If you're waiting for Hanbin to make something happen, you're in for a long wait, Hao hyung."

"I'm sorry?" Hao half coughed, his ability to swallow his own saliva getting messed up with the sharp breath he'd just taken at Taerae's answer.

"He's a good kid, but he's dumb," Taerae explained. "Not widely speaking, but about these things? He's dumb." Hao wondered if he would need Taerae to perform a Heimlich on him, because he wasn't still finding his breath. "He's always the last to know things about himself."

Hao would have preferred it if Taerae had just kicked him out of the building, now that he thought about it. What the hell was he hinting at? Okay, now, Hao *knew* what he was hinting at, he wasn't stupid. But he didn't want to think about the thing Taerae was talking about, about the idea that he and Hanbin were transforming their comfortable friendship — amped up for an audience however much they wanted — in a relationship that wasn't fake, but wasn't real either. So he opted for a coward's way out of this. He deflected. "Since you know a lot of things," he started, not unkindly. "Where can I get a decent manicure for an honest price?"

Taerae raised his eyebrows and then he sighed. "Fine," he said. "Let's play it your way," he shrugged. Then he started looking up nail salons on his phone. Hao would come back from this evening with a good recommendation for a nail technician, but he would also bring home the disquieting feeling of having given too much away, of having been too easy to read. There were already too many people who knew too much about his side of this story: Kuanjui was still a safe person, what with him living away, but Gyuvin and now Taerae were unpredictable. Would they spill Hao's secrets before he was ready to let them be known? "I don't know what Hanbin told you about me," Taerae must be a fucking mind reader. "But I won't go around telling him the things you didn't tell me. This is between you and me."

Hao wished he was better at understanding the people he wasn't really friends with. "Why?"

"Because." Taerae opened YouTube on the large TV in the living room. "I'd like us to be friends, Hao hyung. Seeing as you'll be around a lot. In the future." Hao just wished that Hanbin and Gunwook hurried home as fast as they could.

"Let's watch something fun," Hao said, begging silently that time would pass quicker.

When they punched the door code in, Hao was laughing too hard at a comedy program Taerae had selected. He almost didn't have the time to register the sound of the door being unlocked, before Gunwook flew across the room to lay down on the carpet, flopping down like a bearskin.

"Hi," Hanbin said, from the door, and it was always something breathtaking for Hao to see him like this, with no make-up, in cozy clothes, with his hair down and his glasses on. It made him wish for insane things, like coming home to each other, spending lazy evenings in loose tangles, ignoring empty take-away boxes in favor of dragging each other to the bedroom, overtired and still grateful to be tired together.

"Oh, finally," Taerae got up from the couch, with a yawn. "I'm off from babysitting duty," he smiled at Hao, brightly. "I've trained him to use the TV and the kitchen, so next time you have your boyfriend here without you he's fine on his own and doesn't need me to function. Bye." He somehow dragged Gunwook to his feet, too, and piloted him into the bathroom while closing himself in the bedroom. A magic trick, if one were to ask Hao.

“Did he bully you?” Hanbin asked, finally, *finally* , sitting down next to Hao. Right now, Hao couldn’t care less about the conversations he’d had with Taerae. “I’m sorry, we ran late. The choreographer’s a monster. She ran us down for hours, never satisfied with anything.”

Hao arranged himself so that he could face him, crossing both legs on the couch. “Was she horrible?”

Hanbin’s eyes were sparkling. “She was *incredible* , hyung,” he confessed. His love for dancing was something Hao understood too well. “She moves in a way that- *ugh* . The control she has of her body? Unbelievable! Unfair that someone should be allowed to be *that* good. And the way she composes choreo? Poetry. We were so lucky to work with her.” He was smiling so wide, and he was just so happy, that it made something in Hao’s heart grow even prouder than he’d ever felt for him.

You deserve all of this , he wanted to tell him. *You deserve to be showcased as a dancer everywhere* . “Do you have videos? Of the two of you with the sunbaenim.” Hanbin nodded, pulling out his phone to show some of the stuff they’d worked on.

“The final cut will be released in a couple weeks, I think?” He adjusted himself on the couch, a bit further from Hao, now that he was done with the videos. Hao hadn’t minded their closeness, but he wouldn’t chase it. He still had some dignity. “What did you do today? I talked too much, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Hao said before thinking. He also kinda hit him on his knee. Hanbin blinked twice in confusion, his stupidly long lashes hypnotizing. “I like to hear you talk,” he even added, because at this point, why not dig his own grave deeper? God, why was he acting like he was thirteen and hadn’t yet learned how to act when he liked someone? “I care about the things you say.” Okay, time to shut up, Hao.

Hanbin’s face was much redder than it’d been before. “Still, what did you do today?” Hao let himself relax into the soft fabric of the couch, as he told him about the rehearsals they’d attended for a performance to be held the following day. *What, and you’re here at this hour* . Of course he was here, Hao didn’t say, they wouldn’t have any other time to meet up. He shrugged and claimed he never slept before important performances anyway, so this wouldn’t change anything. He was lying, and Hanbin might know, but, if he did, he didn’t address it. He just listened, and listened, and when Hao started to open up about how tense he was, how scary such a big performance looked to him, Hanbin just tangled their feet together on the couch, and their hands too. And so Hao kept talking, and Hanbin kept listening, and sometimes he interjected with his thoughts on the matter, and Hao almost forgot that he was half in love with him because he was too busy stripping his soul bare in front of him, but then he was hit by the knowledge that he really, really, liked this boy and it stole half a sentence out from his mouth.

“Maybe you should get some sleep,” Hanbin said, kindly mistaking it for a yawn. “Why don’t you take my bed? I can sleep here.” Sometimes Hao thought he must have saved a city or something in his previous life, because how did he deserve such a perfect man? Then again, maybe he must have burned down a city, because no matter how delusional he could be, Hanbin wasn’t his, not in any way it mattered.

“Don’t be stupid,” he replied. “If you won’t let me go home, I’ll take the couch.” And it was final.

taerrorist

- > *your boyfriend is asleep on our couch*
- > *it’s too early for this*
- > *like, in the day*
- > *it’s 6 am*
- > *why is he still here?*
- > *why are you reading these texts but you’re not replying?*
- > *HANBIN.*
- > *i won’t wake him up nicely, i’m about to go start making breakfast. i’ll open the curtains.*

hanbinsung

> *WAIT.*

> *where the hell are you now?*

taerrorist

- > gym <3
- > *with matthew*
- > *[taerrorist sent a photo]*

hanbinsung

- > *how???*
- > *nvm*

taerrorist

- > *your man leave?*
- > *or will we have him for lunch and dinner and idk, should i just tell our company to charge his for rent?*

hanbinsung

- > *taerae, i swear.*

- > *he didn't even wake up on time for his fucking schedule, i feel like shit bc of that, we had to find a taxi in a split second to put him back on time*
- > + *he's going to be scolded by the make up girls a lot, bc he looked so pale ugh*
- > *anyway, stop calling him my boyfriend?*
- > *he's not.*

taerrorist

- > *what will you give me if i stop?*

hanbinsung

- > *what do you want, you leech.*

taerrorist

- > *leech???*
- > *i entertained your BOYFRIEND half evening.*
- > *you should be grateful. i was even nice to him.*
- > *buy me the fancy shampoo. two bottles.*

hanbinsung

- > *fine.*
- > *why are we friends, though?*

taerrorist

- > *because i give amazing love advice.*

hanbinsung

- > *which i've asked? when?*

taerrorist

- > *you'll need me.*
- > *soon.*

hanbinsung

- > *if i ever need love advice i'll ask anyone BUT you.*

taerrorist

- > *suit yourself.*
- > *we'll see pretty soon, anyway.*

taerrorist

> *oh he's learnt how to speak to me!*

> *bye, matt's giving me the stink eye bc i'm texting and not running.*

> *pretty boys shouldn't have to run.*

Hanbin would be late. And then he would be late to the other schedule, the *real* schedule. He'd done his best, but traffic was horrible these days — road works, deviated bus routes, everything — and he'd been stuck on this damned bus for ten minutes and it wasn't moving in the queue and he wanted to get off at this point and walk the rest of the way there. A traffic light switched, or a broken down vehicle was removed, or something else — the bus moved. He checked the time. He would catch the train to get back to the studio the magazine they were going to be interviewed by had rented. It was in quite a central position. If the trains were on time, he would make it. Sure, if this bus got stuck again, then the half hour they'd planned would dwindle down to nothing.

He was the first one to get off from the bus, and he was quick on his feet — Taerae usually joked about how queer people walk faster, Hanbin understood *why* — and all but flew to the café whose address he'd received earlier. *Corner table*, the latest text had said. He scanned two corners, before he found the right table, quickly making his way to it.

"Hi," he sat down, heavily, gracelessly, his T-shirt damp with sweat all over his back.

Hao pushed a glass of iced Coke towards him. "I ordered you this," he said. God bless him. Hanbin took a long sip. God bless whoever invented ice Coke, too. He hated the humidity of the air in summer. "And I brought you back your T-shirt."

Hao passed him a small paper bag, Hanbin took it and threw a glance at the inside. Hao had borrowed a shirt, when he'd slept over. And he'd brought it back, naturally. Hanbin wouldn't have minded if he kept it. "Ah," he said. "You didn't have to."

Hao laughed, and he also sipped on a glass, twin to Hanbin's. "Are you hereby authorizing me to steal more of your clothes without returning them, like, ever?" He was wearing a baseball hat, and the top half of his face disappeared a bit under the brim. A pity. Hanbin wanted to be able to decipher his expressions better. Or, maybe, he just wanted to look at his face better.

"Oh, Jiwoong hyung will just be happy if I have less clothes at home," he joked. Hao's laughter was expected, but he welcomed it nonetheless. "I saw your cover, earlier. The BTS one. Truth Untold. You were all so good on it? I liked it."

"Earlier," Hao echoed, a teasing tilt to his tone. "It came out thirty-five minutes ago," he pointed out. "Did you watch it on the bus on your way here?"

Hanbin felt his face catch fire, "Listen." Hao was laughing quietly, an amused expression on his face. "There's plenty of fans who watch content on public transport," he did his best to sound like he wasn't horribly self-conscious of the way he'd spent the first half of his ride to this café watching Aw4ke on YouTube. He'd been curious, Hao had talked about this cover for a while but hadn't shown him any preview. So, sue him for wanting to keep up on the stuff Hao did. They were supposed to be in this perfect, idyllic, relationship, weren't they? So what was the issue in Hanbin acting like this? (Maybe, the fact that he didn't, ever, think that he wanted to do it to leave a good impression. He just did it. Because it came natural to him.)

"You're saying you're our fan?" Hao was still smiling in the same way, like he found this entire situation actually funny. Like adopting this flirty undertone was funny, like it wasn't making Hanbin's heart beat too quickly, too strongly.

"Sure," he replied, aiming for a good-natured tone. He managed it, for the most part. "I'm a great fan, the best of them. I don't miss a single piece of content." Hao sipped on his glass, without breaking eye contact with him. Hanbin held his gaze, but he knew his cheeks were getting redder. Hao looked away first, and Hanbin breathed.

Hao finished his Coke, gathered his phone from his bag. “So, who’s your bias?”

Hanbin burst out laughing. God, the way he liked being around Hao. “Kim Gyuvin,” he replied, and he, too, grabbed his bag. Hao laughed, loud, too. “I like that kid, do you happen to know him?”

Hao joined Hanbin on the way out of the café. Unfortunately, Hanbin had to start walking towards the subway station. “As a matter of fact,” Hao said, and his hand slipped under Hanbin’s arm, as he started hanging from it, relaxed. “I do know Kim Gyuvin personally. Do you need me to introduce you?”

Hanbin shrugged. In the back of his brain, a stray thought about how much better this would all be if Hao’s hand moved to grab his own. A different thought about how it would only be natural to think of them as a couple, just at a quick glance, without knowing anything about them. A third thought about how Hao liked to act like he was smaller than Hanbin, when he was taller, in truth. And Hanbin would have to move upwards a bit if he wanted to- “No, hyung,” he answered, focusing back on the people around them, on the noises from the cars and everything that wasn’t just Hao. *Only* Hao. “I’m happy even if I don’t meet my idol,” he said, and he didn’t miss the way Hao’s smile turned to a different shape. “I’m happy with this one idol here,” he said.

Hao sighed loudly. “Stop with this cringey stuff,” he said. He was smiling. He was pleased, Hanbin knew. Hanbin let it drop for a while. They covered the way until the station, which meant Hanbin was going to have to get back to his work very soon. Ten minutes on the train, and he would be back with his members. The interview would be nice, he knew that. The interviewer, Han Jehee, was always a good journalist, and Hanbin was familiar with her work with other idol groups. Still, this meant cutting this hangout — he imposed himself not to call it a date — short. And he didn’t even know when he would be able to see Hao again. Their group schedules were insane, and this was the best they could do and it wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t enough time. It wasn’t-

“Did your managers agree to let you come out alone or did you run away without telling anyone?” Hao asked, just as they reached the first flight of stairs. Hao started going down, too, despite not having to catch a train.

“Hey,” he lightly hit him with his shoulder. Hao laughed, and he still didn’t let go of him. Maybe it wasn’t enough time for him, either, Hanbin’s treacherous brain supplied. “I never go out without telling the company. They authorize everything. I’m a good kid.” They stopped before the barriers. It was time to say goodbye. Hanbin had never hated parting ways with someone as much as he was hating it now.

“Hanbin-ie,” Hao took a step back, already leaving, somehow. “I’m sure you’ll do a great job, but I wish you good luck all the same.”

Hanbin nodded. He didn’t know what to say. He wanted Hao to go with him, he didn’t want to go. He wanted things he had no right to want. He wanted to close his eyes and open them to a different place where the only constant was Hao, and no other thing to do, no other person to speak to, no responsibilities, no anything. Him, and Hao. And maybe the chance to understand why it was never enough, the time he had with Hao. Why he could never have enough of Hao, in itself.

He must have closed his eyes, after all, because Hao hugged him and he opened them, surprised. Hao was hugging him, in the middle of the hall of a subway station, and his grip was firm around him, and his head was tucked on his shoulder. Hanbin wrapped his own arms around him. This should last forever, he thought. Hao pushed him away gently.

“You needed this,” he said, and Hanbin knew he was right. He also knew he should feel embarrassed, but he didn’t. He was just grateful that Hao was there. “Now go, all energized and caffeinated.” Hanbin wanted to say something. Words didn’t come to him. “Go,” Hao repeated. “Go, go, go.”

He noticed, as he was closing the small distance between where they’d been standing and where he had to tap his transportation card, that there was a couple of girls hugging in the same fashion as them, just a few steps to their left. One of them had her face completely buried in the other’s hair, and the second one was holding her with her hands on her waist. Hanbin didn’t have to wonder if they were together. He knew. *We’re the same*, he thought. The second girl, the one with her face visible, was smiling. Hanbin caught her gaze, accidentally. They smiled at each other. When he turned back to look at Hao, he saw him still looking at him. “Go,” he mouthed. Hao waved a hand at him. Time to go to work, after all.

taerae from 5tars

> *hello kim gyubin, how are you?*

- > i'm texting for a couple of things!
- > first one: birthday party (mine of course) friday night, i know you're free because hao hyung told me, so please come i'd like it if you came :)
- > second thing: hanbin hyung.
- > how often are they facetimeing?

gyu bin

> Hello!!

- > Oh, absolutely I'll be at your birthday party, wouldn't miss it!! Ricky told me he's coming too, so it's actually all four of us!
- > Who will be there, if I may?
- > Then. UGH.
- > Today alone it was at least three times.
- > Because those were the pauses we've had while filming content, and Hao hyung spent them all on the phone with Hanbin hyung.

taerae from 5stars

- > god above.
- > listen, but, like, i know it'd be bad for me to go and tell hanbin "just take us out of our misery" but, would i be horrible if i told him to please understand he's in love?
- > anyway, my birthday, usual combo us+you, then a few people from my company and some friends from outside? i mean, these are the people i texted, then idk who will show up!
- > ah! there's like an important question: how drunk can you get? what do you have planned for the next day?

gyu bin

- > ugh i can't get much drunk, i have a fitting for a modeling campaign
- > but.
- > i wouldn't encourage you telling hanbin hyung about the thing, you know?
- > i'm worried about them.
- > what if they'll break up for real, after all?
- > like, we're all here saying: okay they'll get together for real, which of course, but when the PR stuff finishes, then what will they do? what if they have to close it off for real? because that would be so unfair. they've found each other, and it'd be really sad.

taerae from 5stars

- > i sincerely hope i won't have to patch up any broken hearts.
- > genuinely, i've never seen hanbin like someone in his life before.
- > and this is..... important. it looks like it is.
- > gyubin i want to see you drunk at my party what am i gonna dooooooooo

gyu bin

- > let's just get ricky drunk and we're even
- > he's the funniest, does all crazy things

taerae from 5stars

- >fine
- > i'll drink, btw. a lot.
- > and i'll be embarrassing. i don't care.

gyu bin

- > ricky said he's fine with getting shitfaces
- > made me promise to wash him up before bed

taerae from 5stars

- > *woah, smart.*
- > *i'll try to exact the same promise from matt and hanbin*
- > *they said they won't*
- > *but i know they will.*

“Hyung!” Hao raised his eyes from the script of a talk show he was going to record in the afternoon. Gyuvin was standing on the door to the vocal room, with a much younger child. Boy. Whatever, he looked like he should be in middle school. “Manager Suhyeok wants you on the phone with the big boss,” Gyubin said, with a weird dance of his eyebrows.

Hao frowned. They didn’t have any meeting scheduled with the CEO, Gyuvin’s *big boss*. Or, at least, not until two weeks, when Ji Ara, a maniac of control like she was, had their bi-weekly check-up scheduled. It was a horrid affair, where she just projected a bunch of media stuff and graphics and said things like: *you should lean more towards physical affection*. Or *you do look convincing enough, but don't get too comfortable or you might slip*. A horror Hao wasn’t looking forward to. A thing that never failed to put strain on his and Hanbin’s real relationship, whatever that was. No matter how comfortable they might have become with each other — within the borders of this insane charade — after these meetings they always were rigid and stiff and ill at ease, as if they’d never had any familiarity with each other to start with.

“Okay,” he said. And he got up from his seat, leaving the script on the table. “Any idea what it’s about?”

Gyuvin shrugged, and he pulled the school kid along with them in the corridor. “They said it’s for you, nothing more.” Hao didn’t like this in the slightest. He didn’t want to get more work, if he was honest. He never thought he would get to say this, but now he needed more free time, not more things to film or record or share or whatever. Gyuvin whispered something to the schoolboy, who nodded.

“I’m sorry,” Hao looked better at this child. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” the kid widened his eyes. “I’m Zhang Hao. Aw4ke.”

The child didn’t immediately reply, his face a bit stunned. “Oh,” he said, in the end. “Han Yujin,” he introduced himself, a bow too deep for the situation they were in. “I train here.”

Oh, what an unlucky boy. He should find himself a better company, while he had time. “Have you been here long?” Hao asked, as they picked up walking to the place where the manager had hidden himself. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before, I’m sorry.”

Gyuvin cut in, laughing. “He arrived a few months ago,” he explained. “But they’re taking in new kids these days, so he’s tasked with showing them around, but he asked me to prepare him better, so he can do it properly. Right?” Han Yujin, eyes round and mouth completely shut, nodded. “He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“Don’t treat him like he’s your puppy,” Hao scolded him lightly. “Han Yujin-ssi, you’re so young!” Yujin seemed to blush a bit, but he managed to smile a bit at Hao. “Are you looking forward to training with more people? It must have been a bit lonely until now.”

“I’m just worried if they’re all better than me I won’t have anything to show for the time I’ve been here,” he said, honest.

“Nonsense,” Gyuvin ruffled his hair. “This kid’s a wonder, you should see him when he dances.” When had Gyuvin seen him, by the way? Was he somewhat in charge of training people too, now?

“Oh, I’m not such an expert on dance, but I trust Gyuvin’s judgment. If he says you’re good, you must be.” Han Yujin nodded a bit, shyly. He looked like he was contemplating whether to say something or not.

“They say your-” the kid started. He stopped. He looked at Gyuvin, who nodded almost imperceptibly. “I’ve heard,” the kid picked up, “that 5stars Hanbin sunbaenim is a great dancer.” Hao fought against laughter. The way he’d turned around his phrasing to make it more polite had been funny.

“Ah, yes,” he said, easily. “Hanbin’s a great dance teacher, too,” he added. “Sometimes, when he’s less busy, he does workshops. If you get the chance, attend one. I’ll ask him when he’s planning to schedule the next one, and let you know.”

Han Yujin looked like he didn’t know how to react. He looked too much like a schoolboy talking to teachers. Hao tried to shake the feeling off his back, he didn’t like to feel this much older than the others in his company. “Thank you,

sunbaenim,” Yujin said.

“None of that shit,” Hao said, with a smile. “Call me hyung or whatever, just, no *sunbaenim* .” Yujin’s eyes were as big as they could be, now. “And it’s not an issue, it’s not like I don’t hear from him anyway. I’ll just ask and we’ll see.”

Yujin nodded again. “Thank you,” he repeated. “And thanks for talking to me, I’m your fan.”

Hao burst out laughing. “We’ll be colleagues soon, don’t be like this,” he said, and he smiled at the kid. “Now, I’m afraid I have to go talk to our manager. See you around, Yujin-ssi. Fighting!”

janghao

> met a big fan of yours at the company

Sung Han Bin <3

> ?

janghao

*> a trainee (small? he’s too young!) whom gyuvinn was dragging around doing idk what
> told me he “heard” that you’re a good dancer*

Sung Han Bin <3

> lol

> if you see him again tell him i’m thanking him :D

> wyd?

janghao

*> manager wanted me on the phone w/ ceo
> can’t find him tho*

Sung Han Bin <3

> okey dokey

> have you had lunch?

janghao

> yep!

> you?

Sung Han Bin <3

> going now with the 02s.

> recording went smoothly

janghao

> great!!

> say hi to matthew and taerae?

> ah, i forgot to tell taerae i’ll come this friday!

Sung Han Bin <3

> :O

> i’ll tell him, np!!

> (i’m glad you’re coming!)

janghao

> of course

> wouldn’t miss it.

> oh! here the manager is, i’m going

Sung Han Bin <3

> *sure byee*

janghao
> *i'll call you later*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *yep!*

> *[Sung Han Bin <3 sent a sticker]*

Suhyeok called back Mr. Lee for Hao. The conversation was, all in all, brief. Mr. Lee was calling to let Hao know that his request for a whole free week for his birthday had been approved. A whole week off *plus* the chance to actually go back home and visit his mother for more than a half day? He was truly getting a huge gift. If the company was being so nice to him, and if they were hiring more trainees, then it meant that business was actually going better. Which also meant that, in the end, Hao's scam relationship had worked. Maybe he should have started playing relationship-baiter sooner. He imagined himself as a serial dater of other distressed entertainers. The idea was ludicrous, but worth lingering over, as Mr. Lee had left him on hold because he wanted to give him his flight details, but wasn't able to find them. Hao imagined himself, a younger version, with differently styled hair, meeting a partner from another agency, and then another, and then a third, and a fourth. His imagination must have been stale, though, because no matter how hard he tried, at a certain point in his fantasy, all these boys turned into Hanbin. Maybe it had been inevitable, then. Maybe he wouldn't have done it, at all, if that day Hanbin wasn't sitting there, in front of him. *Fuck*, why was he always thinking about him, anyway? He was bordering on obsession and he would have to find a way to learn to live without him, at a certain point, and he hoped that point came later than sooner, but this couldn't go on like this. Maybe a good week away from him would help him. Maybe if he focused on his family, then he would gain a better perspective on why he needed to detox himself from Hanbin's omnipresence in his mind.

"Hao-ssi," Mr. Lee's voice came back into the speaker. "Are you still there?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Great," the older man said. "Okay, so you're leaving from Incheon, there's a layover in Shanghai, same thing when you're coming back. We picked seats, already. You're going to have no staff on the plane, and you'll be escorted to your family in Fuzhou, okay?"

Why did it feel like he was a prisoner in a spy movie? "Uh," he hesitated. "I'll have staff at Incheon Airport, right? I need a well-developed disguise, otherwise."

Mr. Lee chuckled on the other end. "Sure, staff will be with you until you embark, we just couldn't spend that much on plane tickets, we're sorry." Hao guessed it was fair. Doubling the expenses of plane fares just for the remote chance that somebody got on his same flight and never left him alone was unreasonable.

"No, I get it," he said, and he knew that he would have to convince himself of this for the next ten days. "Buying two tickets would've been too much, I know."

"Well, three," Mr. Lee said.

"Three?" Hao echoed, and he hated that he felt stupid, because who was going to travel to his family home with him? Sure, Quanrui was Chinese, too, but his mom lived in the States and his dad lived in Shanghai. Maybe he would just fly to Shanghai, and then Hao would go on alone?

"You, Hanbin-ssi, and a third person," Mr. Lee enumerated. Hanbin? Sung Hanbin was going with him to China?

"Hanbin? We hadn't discussed this. We hadn't mentioned we'd have to travel together," he said, in a half panic. He needed to clear his mind of Hanbin, he shouldn't be joining him. He shouldn't be going to his hometown with him. He shouldn't be going to meet his family and his friends from home, and shit. "Does he even know?"

"Oh, Ara is supposed to be talking to him today, but he'll be fine. It's your job, after all." Mr. Lee said, with no worry whatsoever. They were just their puppets. And Hao had just been stupid enough to think that he could have a bit of leverage on his and Hanbin's dynamic. He'd been stupid enough to think that he could be the only master of his own feelings.

He took a breath. "He was supposed to have some group activities that week," he said, because he knew. "Are you sure he'll be coming?"

“Of course, of course,” Mr. Lee reassured him. Only, Hao didn’t want reassurance, he wanted the opposite. “Ara has prepared it really well.”

“Wonderful,” Hao pushed out through his teeth. “Thanks for accepting my request for days off, anyway.”

Mr. Lee laughed again. “Oh, sure,” he said. “We all hope you’ll have a good time with your family.” Hao needed to bang his head against a hard surface for at least seven to ten times.

Sung Han Bin <3

> *do you want me to pull out of the visit to your family?*

janghao

> *i don’t even see how you could do this*

> *let’s just go together*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *i could orchestrate some illness or something*

> *maybe i’ll have my sister break her neck*

janghao

> *??? poor girl?*

> *you’d do that? you’d have someone get seriously injured???*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *for you?*

> *;*

> *you only have to ask, hao-ya.*

janghao

> *boy, maybe i should marry you for real, after all.*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *we’d have to escape to america, or taipei.*

> *europe?*

janghao

> *seems like we’re just flying to fuzhou this time.*

Sung Han Bin <3

> *dang!*

> *next time, then.*

janghao

[draft: i’m so fucking grateful it’s you, you have no idea]

Sung Han Bin <3

> *you’ll have to be my interpreter for a whole week*

> *jesus, i’m sorry for you.*

Taerae was smiling at his brightest, surrounded by all the people he’d invited to his party. It wasn’t a big thing, they couldn’t quite afford to make themselves a reputation of people who partied too hard, they weren’t famous enough. Not yet. But this was good, this was fun. Of course they were all there, the five of them, and Taerae had insisted that Aw4ke attended in their entirety, too, because he was a good man, after all, and he’d become friends with

them in a sincere way that warmed Hanbin's heart. Taerae had wanted to invite a few of his other friends, too. People he'd met at school, people they'd trained with, too, but had picked different ways than them. Hanbin was keeping to the side, now, and Matthew was with him, drinking beer straight from the bottle.

"So," Matthew was saying, as he kept narrating a very long story that he'd started in the car, some thirty-five minutes ago. It involved a lot of people and a lot of unhealthy approaches to love relationships. "He said that she wasn't being honest, right? And then his sister told him to go confront her about it, but he decided that it would be better to just ghost her."

"What?" Hanbin was actually captivated. People fascinated him, especially when they made the worst decisions ever.

"Literally," Matthew went on. "He blocked her on all socials and went on with his life. Of course, his sister told him he was an idiot. But then she wasn't really smart either, because she took it upon herself to go and talk with her brother's ex." Hanbin groaned. "Now, you won't imagine what happened."

"They fought?" Hanbin guessed. "Like, did one slap the other?" Matthew exploded in giggles.

"No!" He said, and he turned to say hi to someone who'd just tapped him on the shoulder. "Oh, hi, oh my god, it's been forever." Hanbin took a sip of his own beer. Hanbin, Park, the one currently talking to Matthew, turned to him immediately after.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "Everytime I see you, you look better, how do you do that?"

Hanbin laughed it off. "You're too much," he said. "How have you been?" He'd been Taerae's classmate in high school, and there had been moments when they'd all been close friends. Then life had made it so that they hardly ever saw each other, except for occasions orchestrated by Taerae himself.

"Can't complain," ParkBin — the old nickname easy to resurface, whenever they were all together — said. "I signed a new contract just last week," he added.

"Come on," Matthew winked at him, too. "Good job, man." ParkBin nodded, very clearly proud, as he deserved to be. "Life's smiling to all of us right now, huh?"

ParkBin's smile was genuinely happy, as he delved into some more specific details of his new contract, with a new agency and everything. It was nice to see him finally be happy about what the company was promising him, after a series of terrible contracts that were just bad, without saving graces. "Ah, hyung, I should tell you, congratulations," he said to Hanbin.

"What?" Hanbin felt confused. "It's not my birthday, today, remember?"

ParkBin laughed. "Asshole," he joked. It was nice how easy some dynamics were to pick up. "I was congratulating you for your boyfriend, duh." Hanbin tried his best not to throw a glance at Matthew. He kept his eyes straight in front of him, bowing a little to ParkBin for his sincere congratulations.

"Did you meet him?" He asked, because Hao had been talking to Taerae for a long time, almost all the time since he'd arrived, and Hanbin could still see him now, still with Taerae and another couple of people. "Hao, I mean."

ParkBin's expression was interesting. He looked admired in the mocking way friends pretend to be half-scandalized when they think you've done something cool. "Hao," he echoed. "You're way past calling him hyung, already?" Hanbin gaped. He hadn't noticed. Hadn't done it on purpose, either. He wasn't one that didn't pay attention to honorifics, he was always mindful of them. He- "Anyway, yeah. I met him. Taerae was so nice, introducing him. You must be happy that Taerae approves of your boyfriend, you know how he is in this thing. He's a viper with those he dislikes. Single-handedly made me break up with that dude, remember?"

Hanbin burst out in laughter. They'd been fresh out of high school, ParkBin had just left their company, too, because he'd said he would look for something better. He'd made a good decision, they all agreed. ParkBin, high on his hard-earned freedom, had started seeing this kid, their same age, a bass player in a band. He was a normal dude, to be fair, and he had a normal relationship with ParkBin. However, he didn't have a normal relationship with Taerae. "Oh god," Hanbin laughed. "What did he use to call him?"

"Floor mop hair," ParkBin supplied, which made Matthew laugh extra hard. "He was so fucking against it, it was insane."

"I used to think it was because he was jealous," Mathew said, with all the calm in the world. Hanbin didn't know how Matthew managed to say the most outrageous things with the straightest face. "But, anyhow, I think he saved you from an idiot. He couldn't even play the bass decently."

Hanbin could only take another sip of his beer. "How do you survive with these two in the same house as you?" ParkBin was asking the real questions. "Anyway, back to your boyfriend. I saw you on the news, actually. I was like: why didn't Tae mention anything? So, I really thought he would *hate* him. I wouldn't have expected to see him here,

and close to Tae? I'm impressed. You picked a good one."

Hanbin hadn't picked anyone. If anything, Ji Ara had picked a good one for him. He laughed at ParkBin's comment. He would have to lie to him, openly. Matthew wasn't saying anything, so he really had to reply, this time. "Yeah," he said. "We really get along," this wasn't *truly* a lie. "I've never gotten along with someone so easily," he topped it off. "So, even if people talk, it's easy enough to just focus on the good part, you know?"

ParkBin's eyebrows rose up. "You're down bad, hyung," he said. Hanbin blinked a couple times too many. "But, again, good for you. You have Taerae's okay, so keep your Hao hyung close."

"Will do," Hanbin said, more automatically than anything else. And then he watched as ParkBin found someone else to greet, moving away quickly, happily and with a wink.

"Down bad, huh?" Of fucking course Matthew wouldn't let it go. "He came, gave you a whole read, and left. What a magnificent dude." Hanbin took a breath, then another one, deeper. He did his best to ignore the urge to slap that idiotic smile off of Matthew's face. "Anyway, the sister went to talk to the ex, right?" Thank God. Would this story ever get to its end? "They met a couple of times to try and patch things up, but the most insane thing happened."

"What's our Matthew talking about?" Hanbin wasn't above committing homicide. If he didn't get to hear the end of this fucking story he would have to kill someone. Hao included. He wasn't getting any special treatment.

"I'll catch you up later, hyung," he was quick to say, before Matthew started from the beginning once again. "It's too long and I'm too fucking curious, don't distract him."

Hao made a half-disgusted face, then he shrugged, hooked his chin over Hanbin's shoulder and set himself to listen to the rest, as if it was the most natural thing ever. As if he hadn't just ditched the birthday boy to join them in the most boring corner of the room. "I'll hold you to this promise, brat," he said, low. Hanbin hoped he could ignore the shiver that was running through his spine. He couldn't miss the end of Matthew's story.

"So, let me get this straight," another hour and a half had gone by, and now Jiwoong was hearing a compressed version of the same story, summarized by Hanbin for Hao and now being explained again to him and Gunwook. "This dude cheated on his girl with this other girl, who then he suspected was cheating on him, too."

"Yep," Matthew smiled at him.

"And so he ghosted the new girl, but his sister went to talk to her to help out her brother, and ended up dating the girl herself?" Jiwoong had actually got it right. "So, the two girls are still together, but the brother, in the meantime, has found out that his ex, whom he cheated on, is pregnant. So he's convinced it's his child and he's marrying her, but the sister's girlfriend thinks that it isn't actually his child?"

A cheer from Hanbin, Hao and Matthew. " *Yes* ." They were all sitting down, now, pressed together on top of two small sofas in another corner of the party hall. Gunwook occupied an armrest on his own, and he looked the most uncomfortable of them.

"What a horrible story," Gunwook said. "I'm so sorry for everyone involved?"

"I mean," Hao cut in. He was sitting half on top of Hanbin. It was something Hanbin was trying not to think about. "The sister and her girl played it by the rules," he said, and there was no fucking need for his hand to grab Hanbin's knee. He was already well-balanced. Hanbin, again, tried to focus on something else entirely. Having Hao this close, all this time, it wasn't easy. Hanbin knew he and Hao were an item for work purposes, and for those only. But Hao was attractive, and Hanbin had more and more of a hard time ignoring this fact. *Down bad* . He wasn't. Not really. But Hao would make it easy to be down bad for him. He shifted his legs a bit on the small couch. Hao turned to look at him with a frown. Hanbin shrugged, forcing out a smile. Hao rolled his eyes, but he leaned even further into him.

"You're all a bunch of anti-social people," Taerae joined them, leaning unsteadily on Gunwook's wide shoulders. "I have a lot of people over, and you're all here, gossiping and-" he met Hanbin's gaze. He stopped a bit in his sentence. He looked well and truly drunk. "Let's dance," he said. "Hanbin hyung, you're dancing with me. Sorry, Hao hyung. I'll steal your man for a while. Don't worry, I'll give him back."

Hao's laugh was bright and he let Hanbin get up. "Dance well," he said to him.

"I'm not *his* man," Hanbin tried to protest with Taerae, as he dragged him closer to a speaker. Taerae was already moving to the beat. He threw a level, intoxicated, stare at Hanbin.

"Oh, Hanbin-ah," he said. He was smiling, and he cupped Hanbin's cheeks in his hands. "Of course you are." He caught Hanbin's hands and made him move in sync with him.

“Am not,” Hanbin said, weakly. Just for himself. Because, sure as hell, Taerae wasn’t listening to him. Matthew and Jiwoong joined them soon after, and, along with them, Quanrui, Gyuvin, Seungeon, all of them moving as a pack after having talked to someone else they knew all night. It was clear Gunwook was staying behind having some kind of conversation with Hao. What was bad, though, was how bad Hanbin wanted to be in Gunwook’s place. He willed himself to get lost in the music, to let his limbs follow the beat and to pick up the rhythm. He emptied his mind. This was why he was good at dancing, he thought. Because it allowed him to stop worrying about things. “Happy birthday, RaeRae,” he yelled, over the music.

“Thank you,” Taerae smiled back at him. “I’m happy you’re my friend,” he said, completely drunk in the way he slumped his words together.

“Me too,” Hanbin said back. “I was lucky to have you watch over me all this time,” he hoped Taerae understood half of what he’d said. The DJ changed the song to something more fit for a whole club. The entirety of Taerae’s guests went wild. Hanbin saw Hao getting up from the couch. His mind empty, only the music and his body, he stopped thinking about Hao and the thousand questions he made him ask himself. This was a night made for having fun. No doubts allowed at Taerae’s twenty-second’s (twenty-first, by international standards) birthday party.

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now
20230720 Hao Airport Shot.

[Photos]

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

woooooohhhhhh he looks so good!!!!!! it appears he’s leaving on his own? no members? is he going home???? (i hope)

5stars translations @starsintranslation — just now
HB sent a photo

HB: see you soon lovelies!!

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

now..... NOW.
I’m not going to say anything.

stream 5stars @wishuponastar — just now

hao at the airport (official schedule and everything) + hanbin posting a photo of his hand on a suitcase (no official schedule (yet), only whispered gossip that he won’t attend the two festivals of this week)

stream 5stars @whisuponastar — just now
sometimes i forget we’ve had an official statement that they’re dating lol
like, of course they might be travelling together.

stream 5stars @wishuponastar — just now

i’m just a bit sad that hanbin won’t be there for the two festivals they had scheduled as 5stars. but as long as he’s with hao it’s okay, we know he’s happy, so it’s okay!

i hope they’ll get some rest and have some time for themselves w/o the media up their asses.

let's see if AJEnt will say smth

Hao hated it when connection flights created trouble. Like, what was he supposed to do in an airport waiting lounge, with two suitcases, a carry-on bag, his stomach protesting from hunger and the worry that his parents weren't answering his texts about his flight being delayed so maybe they would wait for him for three hours longer than necessary. He'd tried calling them, too, but it was not possible because it counted as an international phone call and his fucking phone wasn't authorized to make them. Hanbin was nowhere to be found, too. *I'm going to buy some snacks*, he'd said. And he'd fucking vanished into thin air. He opened KaTalk. Naturally, it didn't connect. Also naturally, he still hadn't finished setting up a WeChat profile for Hanbin. *We'll do it while we eat something*, Hanbin's damned optimism. Hao wasn't made for traveling without supervision or without management, that was clear. He kept wondering if Hanbin had been stormed by someone who recognized him, if he'd been kidnapped because they thought that their agencies were rich and would pay ransom. He would wait ten more minutes, then he would contact airport security. Make him be humiliated by being called over the speakers and all.

mama

- > *Your dad saw that the flight was delayed, don't worry.*
- > *Does your friend have any requests for dinner?*

hao

- > *Hanbin eats everything.*
- > *See you later.*

mama

- > *Okay.*
- > *Fly safe.*

Hao pocketed his phone. He checked his surroundings again. Still no sign of Hanbin. Maybe he should already have alerted his mother that her guest had found his way back to Seoul by walking inside a Shanghai airport on his own. Hao was about to get up and talk to a ground attendant about his missing "boyfriend" when Hanbin walked through the lounge's door, an exasperated expression on his face and a plastic bag in his hand. Hao found it almost comical, the way he looked so visibly done.

"I didn't think it would be so hard to find something to eat," Hanbin said, plopping down on one of the padded chairs. "Please tell me you're fine with eating sticky airport pasta, because I don't know if I'll be able to go and queue again for anything."

Hao opened the plastic bag to fish out a couple of pasta portions. Calling them sticky was generous, but he was sure he'd eaten worse food as a trainee, so it wouldn't be a problem. He picked up the plastic forks that came with them, and the two cans of Cola. "I thought I would have to come and save you from some mafia dungeon," Hao replied, opening Hanbin's pasta first, and handing it to him.

"Action hero Hao," Hanbin muttered, amused by himself, and he threw a small smile at Hao. Hao hated that he never managed to stay irritated at him for long. He wanted to yell at him for making him worry. He honestly wanted to yell at him because he was here, in the first place, when this was supposed to be Hao's only holiday in longer than a year. Hao just rolled his eyes at him, gesturing at him to eat. "What weapon would you use, as an action hero, hyung?"

Hao didn't want to have this stupid conversation. He wanted to complain about everything that wasn't going according to his wishes. He took a bite of the awful pasta. The tomato sauce was too acidic. "I kinda want to strangle you right now," he said, as calmly as he could. Hanbin's eyes widened. "You were lost inside this huge ass airport, and I couldn't call you or text you and you don't even speak Chinese. And I know it was my own fault for not coming with you, but I was so fucking anxious and then you come back and you act like everything's fine, and—"

"I'm sorry," Hanbin's face was serious. Hao deflated. "I'm sorry," Hanbin repeated. "I shouldn't be making this harder than it already is," his eyes fell down to look at the floor. "I know this trip is stressful enough, I should have

been-”

“God, please stop,” Hao cut him off. “It’s fine,” Hanbin’s eyes were now fixed on his face, and his mouth was round in surprise, like a child. Hao hated that he couldn’t even stay mad. “Let’s just eat, let’s forget about this. Don’t do it again.”

Hanbin nodded. Then he ate a forkful of the disgusting pasta. Then he stared at Hao for two whole seconds, and he took a second bite of their lunch. “I really don’t want to be a burden for you,” Hanbin said, his voice low. “We’ve done our best this far, but this trip was a little too much of our bosses to ask of us. And I can’t imagine how much you would have preferred to be without me right now. So, I’ll really try not to be a nuisance. I’m so sorry to be intruding on your family time like this.”

Hao felt like closing his eyes and yelling into the void for hours. “Hanbin,” he said. He took a breath. “You’re never a nuisance, okay? If I’d had to do this, all of this, from the TikTok challenge to the seven hundred movies we’ve watched, to taking a plane with you to go back home, with someone that wasn’t you-” this felt insane to say in such a place like an airport. Or maybe the transient nature of airports, where people come, and go, but they don’t stay, made it somewhat better. “What I’m trying to say is that I’d have hated all of this, if it had been someone else. So, no. You’re not a burden. You’re not a nuisance. And you’re not intruding. Okay?”

Had he said too much? Was Hanbin going to put two and two together and realize that Hao had been a little bit too happy to spend time with him lately? Was he going to try and find a way to cut this visit short? To live an independent and parallel life while in China? “Hyung,” he said, finally. “You’re going to make me cry, sooner or later,” he was saying this with a smile, if hesitant. Hao sighed.

“Eat your lunch, Sung Hanbin,” he said, again. “Before our connection flight gets announced.”

Hao thought that he would have to work hard not to focus on this conversation with Hanbin. He spent the first half of their second flight worrying about it. There was something in how Hanbin had expressed his own preoccupations. Was he really convinced that he was something Hao had to endure, without any pleasure at that? Because that wasn’t true, and Hao was ninety-nine percent sure that he himself wasn’t a burden to Hanbin, that Hanbin was genuinely happy to spend time with him. He wasn’t going to doubt that, they’d spent the last month getting even closer to each other, and most of the things they did together weren’t requirements of their agencies and never even got caught by the media. However, maybe Hao hadn’t been good enough at making Hanbin feel, well, loved. It was possible that Hao had been acting too cold. Or, on the other hand, Hanbin was just insecure in this regard. Hanbin, who never faltered on stage and who never messed up anything in interviews. Hanbin, who was born to be a performer and who was perfect in everything. Hanbin, who possibly had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that Hao could actually enjoy his company.

Hao dozed off with these thoughts, and then he woke up with the knowledge that he would have to do so many things in just seven days. He would have to visit his grandparents, both sets. Then he would have to plan something with the people he’d grown up with, there was no chance that those assholes would let him live in peace if he didn’t hit them up. And then, surely, his mother would want him to go visit his middle school teacher, the one who’d told him to start dancing, instead of only studying music. And then he had to check up with management if there was something they’d found for him to do while there, even though he hoped it wasn’t the case. He wished his mother had prepared pork for dinner. He wished his dad had bought the good wine, the one they only used to drink for birthdays when he still lived with them. He wished his neighbors still had the pretty fairy lights up over their windows, so that they would warm up the view from his room.

“Hao!” His father was waving from a corner of the arrival hall, a wide smile on his face. What an ugly shirt he was wearing, he looked like he’d just come back from gardening or hiking. Hao turned to take a quick glance at Hanbin, who was dragging both his and Hao’s suitcases. He was quick to retrieve his own from his hand. Hanbin looked a bit intimidated by the whole setting, he was slouching his shoulders a bit and he was looking everywhere at the same time. Hao didn’t think about it twice, he moved his suitcase to his other hand, and with his right one he hung himself on Hanbin’s arm. *Let’s go*.

“How was your flight?” His dad asked instantly, as soon as they reached him. “Did you guys have lunch? Did you get your luggage alright? Anything that still has to be picked up?”

Hao just hugged him quickly, before replying. His father hugged him back, and Hao took in his solid frame, the roughness of his shirt’s cotton, the gentle way he still held him, as if he were still a baby. “The flight went well,” he

said. And then he turned to Hanbin, who was standing a bit to his right, politely and demurely. Picture perfect, as always, possibly not having understood a single word they'd just said. "Dad, this is Hanbin," he said, pulling him a bit closer. "He doesn't really speak Mandarin, but he'll try to, because he's sweet about it. Try to speak to him slowly, if anything. Or in English." Hanbin was looking at him with some degree of confusion on his face. Hao switched back to Korean. "Hanbin-ah, this is my dad," he explained, although it was obvious. "He's a bitch and won't help you with Mandarin, so please address him in English. He can speak English."

Hanbin's eyes widened a bit at that, but he nodded. Then he bowed. Too deep. Hao pulled him up by the shoulders. "Thank you for having me," Hanbin said, in English. Hao had to look away. How was he going to survive a whole week of this kind of interaction between Hanbin and his parents?

"Yah," he hissed, after his dad had smiled back at him and welcomed him quickly. "This isn't a rom-com about meeting your fiancé's parents," he said, too quickly, a bit breathless. "You don't have to impress them or anything," he added.

Hanbin followed both Hao and his dad to the car. "I don't want them to think ill of you because you're working with me," he said, before putting the suitcases in the back trunk.

"Jesus, Hanbin," he half swore. "Won't you ever relax?" As if he wasn't stressed himself. Because his dad was watching curiously between the two of them. And he was smirking, too. And Hao knew, he truly knew, that he was too transparent for his own good. "Let's go home," he said, and he prayed that his father would somehow forget to tell his mom that he'd seen through his own son in the blink of an eye.

hao

> we're home and my dad is already trying to send me crazy

juii

*> you know what upsets me the most
> that you've disappeared from the face of the earth for days
> and i've found out from fucking twitter that you've traveled home with your not-boyfriend
> now you wechat me and you claim that your dad has already seen you be the gayest twink ever for your not-boyfriend? you deserve it.*

hao

> ouch.

> sorry about everything

> it's all the agencies' doing, anyway.

juii

*> say hi to your parents
> and enjoy the honeymoon with your hot boyfriend
> sorry! not-boyfriend, i meant
> ;)*

hao

> this is why i haven't been replying in forever.

> will say hi to mom and dad tho

juii

> jokes aside, how's hanbin doing?

hao

> he's just looking out of the car window and somehow he replies to dad's questions.

> in eng

> he's nervous lol

> said he's worried my parents will judge him negatively and it might reflect on their opinion of me

juii

- > *hao, be honest for once, why haven't you been kissing this guy dumb?*
- > *he's so freaking nice to you????*

hao

- > *because i'm stupid, probably.*
- > *honestly, though, how am i going to break up with him?*

juii

- > *you don't.*
- > *and fuck your bosses.*
- > *they put the two of you together, they'll have to deal with the consequences*

hao

- > *if only!*

Hao's home was very different from the house Hanbin had grown up in. Where Hanbin's apartment had been compact, borderline cramped, full of things he and his sister left lying around (to no one's pleasure, least their own, because they could never find anything), Hao's parents' house was large, spacious, tidy. It didn't make it any less welcoming, but it was totally different. It was clear Hao's parents had nice jobs, both from the fact they owned a house, and not an apartment, and from the two parallel sets of school certificates and university degrees hanging in the corridor upstairs, in full sight as Hanbin followed Hao to what was supposed to be his room for the whole week.

"My mom prepared the guest room for you," Hao explained, translating what his mother was saying. She waited for him to be done, before saying something else. Hao didn't make any particular expression, before turning it into Korean. "She says that she thought you would rather have your own privacy, so she didn't ask if you preferred the guest room." His mother didn't add anything, but Hao went on after a couple seconds. "My room is the one next door, anyway. But I'll show you around."

Hanbin's mother was studying him. His father had been studying him, too. Hanbin felt like a sort of a lab experiment. "Thank you," he said, with his terrible Mandarin that at least allowed him to thank people. He'd been studying, truly. But these people weren't sparing him in the slightest and it was clear that his two months on basic Mandarin amounted to almost nothing.

Hanbin's mother spoke again. "She says it's her pleasure and that she looks forward to knowing you better," Hao translated. "And she added that you look better in person than in photos." Hanbin must have looked red as a tomato and shocked, too, because Hao's mother burst out laughing, and she just left them there, retiring to somewhere else.

"Your house is huge," Hanbin said, after a very long moment of silence. "I've been living in a hole for the last four years, it's like being sent to live in Versailles for a week."

Hao sat down on the guest room's mattress, observing the room as if he, himself, wasn't really familiar with it. "I've been living in a hole for the last four years, too," he replied. "My room is, like, a third of this. And I can hear Gyu snoring with the thin walls we have." Hao seemed to realize the absurdity of the differences between his family home and the place he'd choose to live his dream in. It was clear why his mother always insisted that this choice of career mightn't have been the best for him.

"I'll remind you that I have two roommates and the most privacy I get is by pulling a tent over my bed," Hanbin said. He, too, used to have a whole room at his parents' apartment. If Hao had to stay over at theirs, though, he wouldn't get a whole room. He would get an air mattress on the floor, at best. At worst, the spare *yo* his sister kept in the back of her wardrobe for when her friends came to sleep over.

"Do you want to see my room?" Hao asked, and it felt a bit like they were in high school. Like he was visiting for the first time the house of a much cooler classmate. Like, somehow, he was going to get butterflies in his stomach just because of the fact that he was allowed in such a private space.

The walls in Hao's room were full of photos and posters. Him with his friends, postcards from foreign countries

and local attractions, sketches and drawings and sheet music and cut-outs from magazines about pop music. There was a poster of Kara hanging on the side of his wardrobe. "Taste," Hanbin commented, fighting back a smirk.

"I was fourteen and I felt like I'd discovered a new world," Hao said, a proud set to his shoulders.

"Oh, my sister and I fought for a week about an AoA poster," Hanbin replied, with a shrug. "She won." Hao laughed, and there was something about seeing him laugh the very same laugh as always, but in *his* space. In his home. Hanbin felt incredibly light. More than he usually did when they were together.

"Let's go see what's for dinner?" Hao asked, softly, as if he didn't really care. He was looking at Hanbin, and Hanbin didn't feel nervous under his gaze. It was like being hugged, being looked at by Hao. It was like Hao was feeling too many things, surely most of them good, and the only way out he was granting them was through his eyes. It was insane, how Hanbin firmly believed that nothing bad could happen, as long as Hao looked at him like that.

"Lead the way, hyung," he wasn't going to look away. Never, if he could.

Hao's mother had made pork. It tasted a lot like vinegar, but it was good, and the dinner was nice, altogether. It was only the four of them, which might have made it awkward, if not for the way Hao's father kept trying to involve Hanbin in conversation, making sure to turn to him every once in a while with a nice question in easy English. Hao tried to translate as much as he could of the things his mother wanted from him or from the both of them. They were acting really hospitable, if one considered that Hanbin had basically been imposed onto them by the people who were hiring their son. Hanbin ate everything, he made sure to tell them that it was all great, and that he loved eating hand-made food.

"Have you been to China before?" Hao's father asked, as his wife was bringing some ice cream out from the freezer. Hao had gone with her to grab some spoons and bowls. Which left Hanbin alone with Hao's father.

"No," Hanbin replied. Hao's father looked like a kind man, but he was still wary that sooner or later either he or his wife would bring out something about his and Hao's arrangement. And he wouldn't be able to reply. "This is the first time I've traveled here."

Hao's father nodded. "We'll make sure you get to see a good deal of things here," he said. "I'll put Haohao to work, he knows what you should see," Hanbin nodded, again. He felt like he was doing a great deal of nodding, he looked like a nodding puppet. "He'll be happy to take you around," he added. Hanbin didn't know about that, he thought that maybe Hao would be happy about not having any responsibilities for a few days. "Are you friends with Haohao's group members?"

"Yes," Hanbin replied, this time. "We're all quite close these days," he didn't need to explain why it was so. "They're good people, I enjoy their company a lot."

"We always worry for our Hao, with him living so far away," Hao's father sounded a bit too honest. Like he was trying to get a very important message across. "And we're glad he has people around him who care for him," he was still looking at Hanbin with a good degree of gravity. "You, too. We hope you know that we're putting trust in you to take care of him, to a certain extent." Hanbin didn't really know what to say. What was he even supposed to say? That he was the one who needed more care, after all? That he'd never felt up to the task of being on Hao's side? That he would still always do his best to be a good friend, a good co-worker and a good person, all around? That he hoped that being a good person could be enough to bring their son some ease and some support?

"Ah, dad," Hao walked back into the kitchen. "Stop terrorizing Hanbinnie," he winked at Hanbin, mainly because he'd said this in Korean, for his sake. He added something else in Mandarin, after that, and he sat back on his chair, followed quickly by his mother. Hanbin ate the ice-cream with his heart pounding wildly. What did Hao's family expect of him, exactly? What did taking care of their son entail, in their opinion? Hao didn't dissuade him from offering to help his mother with doing the dishes, and he left him alone with her, too. Fortunately, she didn't start any other awkward conversation, keeping it light with general questions about Hanbin's family and his school days. She seemed pleased enough when he told her that he also studied to be a professional dance instructor, with a whole degree in progress and all. He found himself praying that this week passed by quickly.

"Bin-ah," his own mother's voice on the phone sounded shaky. "You should have called earlier," she protested. "Did you bring some presents to Hao's parents? Did you help in the house? Don't make them wash anything for you, alright? Did you bring enough clothes? Don't make them do anything for you, be nice." She'd said all this three hundred times before he'd left, so it was almost like listening to a recording. Hanbin had brought clothes for a legion, and he was more than old enough to know that he shouldn't impose when visiting someone. He'd also brought Hao's

parents something, of course. He wasn't an animal. They had been all smiles as they unwrapped the hand-painted traditional vase he'd bought for them. Expensive, it had been. But it looked good, and they were having him over for a whole week, so it was only fair.

"Yes, mom," he said. "I'm doing everything as you said." Then he briefly thought that he should ask how she'd survived meeting his dad's parents for the first time. Not that it was the same thing. Not at all. Hao's parents knew that they weren't a real couple. Which his own mother, uhm. Still didn't know.

"And, of course, your Hao can come have lunch whenever he wants, once you're back, I feel bad that they're doing all this for you while I haven't even seen your-"

"Yeah, sure," Hanbin cut her out, as Hao was opening the door to his room. He couldn't quite explain to him how it had happened that he'd never bothered to inform his mother about the true nature of their agreement. Their purely commercial agreement. "Mom, I have to go. Say hi to everyone, give a kiss to the dogs. I'll call you tomorrow."

Hao was standing against the door frame, his hair down on his forehead, a soft-colored pajama on. There was still a towel around his neck, making it clear that he was coming from a shower. Hanbin found himself a bit breathless. Hao was beautiful in a way that was always, somehow, new. He would look at him and always find him beautiful, as if it was the first time he realized that, yes, he liked Hao's face a lot. And, lately, this happened more and more often. It had been easier at first, to ignore just how much of an impact Hao had on him, with his looks and with his personality and with the words he said, and with the smile that accompanied them. Now, though. Hanbin felt like he was becoming a bit crazy about him.

"Do you want to watch something together?" Hao asked, his voice clear and soft at the same time. *No*, Hanbin thought. *I don't want to have you laughing on my side while I still can't understand why you make me feel like this, like every milligram of oxygen I breathe gets sucked out of my lungs the instant you get close to me.*

"Sure," he said, because he was weak. Hao smiled, excitedly dropping to sit next to Hanbin on the guest room's wide mattress. The bed dipped under his weight, and Hanbin's stomach dropped along with it. Why was this so hard? It had been easier back at home. This felt new.

"Oh," Hao laughed, throwing his whole head back. "I forgot to bring along my iPad, wait a second."

hanbin

> i'm suddenly glad that you paranoidly made yourself a wechat account

kim tae rae

> i'm holding it in

hanbin

> what are you talking about now?

kim tae rae

> why are you texting me now?

> shouldn't you be going to sleep?

hanbin

> lol

> we're starting to watch a drama

> when hyung's ready

> but anyway

kim tae rae

> yeah, tell me.

hanbin

> why can't i seem to be normal when he's with me?

kim tae rae

>
> *haem.*

hanbin

> *i feel like,,, all over the place.*
> *my stomach feels weird*

kim tae rae

> *it's just a week, hyung.*
> *you'll be back soon.*

hanbin

> *you're right.*
> *this was a bad idea.*
> *the trip, the family, the whole thing tbh*
> *the whole relationship thing was a bad idea*
> *look at me now.*

kim tae rae

> *told you so.*
> *that's what i'd been holding in just now btw.*

hanbin

> *i can't stand you.*

kim tae rae

> *i'll live.*

“Grandmother doesn’t really know much about what I do for a job,” Hao explained to Hanbin, while they were driving to her house. Hao hadn’t been driving much in the last few years, but his dad had been unmovable. Hanbin was a guest. He couldn’t ask Hanbin to drive on roads he wasn’t familiar with. So, now, Hao was trying his best to get reacquainted with the gearstick and clutch rhythm. He was one more instance of his car stalling away from asking Hanbin to switch places. “So, I mean. It’s not like you’ll talk to her in my absence, she knows no English,” Hanbin chuckled. “Anyway. I’ll probably tell her you’re a generic friend, no work connotations, okay? That fine with you?”

Hanbin nodded, “Sure thing,” he said. “You didn’t have to bring me along, though. You can still drop me off at a café and pick me up later. I’ll read a book, I don’t know. I have a book with me.” Hao turned a quick second to look at him, then focused back on the road.

“Don’t be stupid, you’re coming with me,” Hao’s mom had already told her mother that Hao had a guest over, it would look horrible if he showed up alone. “She’s looking forward to meeting some young people. She’s ancient.”

“Yah,” Hanbin protested lightly. “Am I just here to be shown off for my looks?”

Hao had to stop himself from thinking too hard about what a wonderful reality it could be if Hanbin was really his to call his boyfriend. His grandmother wouldn’t understand it, either way. But he would still be happy, and proud, to tell her. Fuck. “Of course, Hanbin-ah,” he replied.

Hanbin scoffed. Then he grimaced when Hao fucked up again his shifting of the gears and the car scraped loudly. “Hao, I’m begging you to let me drive on the way back. You’re killing this car.” Didn’t he know.

Hao’s social schedule was too packed for his habits. He was too misanthropic at heart to be enjoying all of this, but naturally, he’d had to tell his old friends that he was back, so, of course, they wanted to meet up to have dinner and drinks. So, off from grandma’s house to a stupid downtown bar that hadn’t been here the last time Hao had. They’d looked it up on the web. It promised a variety of “gourmet steamed buns”, Hao hated the popularity of the *gourmet* concept, it made no sense at all, and he was tired, and he didn’t feel like spending all evening in a loud place with

people he wasn't really friends with anymore.

"Zhang Hao," a loud voice called for him, as soon as he walked through the door. Hanbin was right in his tow, and Hao was not above begging him to fake some kind of emergency that would allow them both to leave. "Dude, I haven't seen you in forever," Yifeng. He'd been one of his closest classmates in high school. "Look at you, look at how cool you look," he looked mostly the same, if a bit thicker and with less pimples. He'd majored in computer science, the last Hao had heard of him.

"Hao-gege," Chuhua. Oh she was there too? Hao didn't know if he was pleased or annoyed. She'd always been his classmate, too. And she'd always made sure he knew that her parents would like the two of them to get married. Hao, for his part, had made it clear early on. He and girls didn't mix in that way. "Ooh," she said, getting up and taking a good, long, *rude*, look at Hanbin. "I saw it on social media," she made sure that Hanbin knew she was talking about him. "But I honestly didn't think much about it. Thought you'd be playing it up for the publicity or something," Hao froze. "But you're bringing him to meet the parents, gege. Must be serious for you."

Hao glanced at Hanbin again. He found him already looking back at him. He wished he was lying, when he said. "Well, pity. It *is* serious."

Chuhua, paying him little to no mind, turned to Hanbin: "Hello," she said, with a shockingly good pronunciation in English. "Welcome, I'm Hao's oldest friend," it wasn't even a lie. "Pleased to meet you!"

Hanbin smiled at her, and the only thing Hao wished was for him to somehow understand telepathically that this girl here was too smart for the two of them, even combined, and she had the potential to destroy everything they'd built in three months, if she so wished. "The pleasure's mine," Hanbin said back. "I'm Hanbin," was he going to stop there? "Hao's boyfriend, but you know it already." Hao's heart stuttered. He fought to find back his breath, it was too much. Hanbin and his fucking ability to never read situations wrong were too much.

"Ah, you've started with the introductions," Jiayi, who used to sit right in front of Hao for all of senior year, and was, possibly, the girl with the biggest repertoire of unusual earrings Hao had ever met, emerged from somewhere, with a few glasses in her hands. "Hi, Haohao," she said, with a big smile. "And hi, Hao's Korean dancing boyfriend," Hanbin's shocked face made Hao burst out in laughter. "I've stalked all your videos on the internet, I've even bought a VPN to be sure that I didn't miss anything," she said. "Why are we standing in the middle of this room, anyway? Why aren't we sitting down like normal people?"

Hao didn't know how, but the evening progressed quickly. They ate, a lot, too. The girls didn't stop talking for a single second, making it kinda hard for Hao to insert himself in the conversation, as he tried to also explain things to Hanbin so that he could somewhat understand what was going on. They were all nice, for the most part: no one spoke Mandarin for too long, leaving him cut out from what they were saying. Hanbin looked at least a bit interested in what they were saying, mostly because they were just discussing a lot of gossip about people they'd grown up with, catching up Hao on what he'd missed by living abroad. It was weird, how they didn't seem to take into consideration the fact that they were having dinner with people who regularly made headlines. They asked very few questions about what they did in Seoul, and almost didn't care that they kinda worked with very famous people. They just were the same as always. "No, because," Jiayi was laughing around a glass of beer. "This was someone we couldn't stand, back in school," she was talking to Hanbin as if she'd known him forever. She was so expansive. Hao put one more dumpling on Hanbin's plate, and signaled it quickly to him. "And now she's, like, super successful and I keep being a major loser," Jiayi was still laughing as she said that, which meant that Hao could laugh, too. Hanbin shifted on his seat, moving closer to Hao. Hao let his hand rest on Hanbin's knee under the table, and Hanbin shifted even closer, so much that now Hao was half leaning against him. Did he have any idea what he was doing to Hao's health?

"Okay," Yifeng clapped his hands. "Now, we know you've just come from far away and all, but," the girls were overexcited. "What about this new club that opened, like, five hundred meters from here? We went there last week, and it's great, good music and nice people. And I know you don't club as much as you'd like to when you're in Korea, Hao," they weren't really wrong. "Hanbin? You up for it?"

Hanbin threw an interrogative glance at Hao. Their clothes weren't anything fit for any club, which, honestly, bothered Hao to a certain extent. Hao squeezed his knee a bit. "What do you wanna do?" He whispered, deliberately asking it in Korean. "Be honest, Bin-ah. Whatever you prefer."

Hanbin looked at him for way longer than necessary, as if he was trying to detect what he wanted him to say. For once, Hao didn't have his answer, already. "Sounds fun, doesn't it?" Hanbin whispered back. "Unless you have plans for us tomorrow morning." Hao's only plan was to keep his mind straight enough not to end up kissing Hanbin on the first occasion. This week was supposed to be his detox period. Yeah, it was turning into the hardest, strongest, exercise

of restraint.

Hao *loved* clubbing. He loved the music, loud, reverberating down to his bones, through his muscles, throbbing in his ribcage as if his heart was all around him and not just within him. He loved how he could move freely, how he could just let go of it all. How people looked at him not to try and find a fault with him, but to appreciate him. He loved the electricity that came out of nowhere between people, just by dancing together to the same music. He loved to see his friends laugh and have fun in his same way, with Chuhua swinging round, as Jiayi made her spin like a ballerina.

“They’re fun,” Hanbin yelled over the music, to be heard. Hanbin. Shit, Hao loved him, more than anything he’d ever loved. “And I think they’re, like, in love.”

“Who?” Hao yelled back, and he also moved closer to him, under the pretense of not hearing well. Hanbin laid his hands on his hips, insane man that he was. Hao kept trying to move to the beat.

“The girls,” Hanbin replied, which was just absurd. Hao laughed and they were a bit too close to each other, because he could feel Hanbin’s hiccuping breath as he laughed against his own cheek. Hao had to get some distance between them, before he did the worst thing. Surely, what he did, instead, was wrap his own arms around Hanbin and hug him. He pressed his face against his shoulder, away from his face. Hanbin’s hands moved away from his hips, up to his waist, around his back. “I mean it,” Hanbin said, somehow being heard. “Look at them.”

Hao disentangled himself a bit, just enough to twist himself into watching his two friends dance with each other, smiling and laughing and, to Hanbin’s credit, never looking away from each other. *Are we like them ?* He wanted to ask. *Do we look like that, too?* “Let’s not make Yifeng fifth wheel us, then,” he said, and, rather unwillingly, he stepped away from Hanbin.

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

SHB sent texts:

it’s hao’s bday soon

hahahahah

what if i’d forgotten my present at home lol

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

SHB sent texts:

i didn’t actually forget it

lol

oh, you knew that i was on a trip with him, right?

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

SHB sent texts:

it’s fun!!

we went hiking in a huge natural park today. the scenery was beautiful. hao hyung was proud of his hometown!!

he promised we’re going to a zoo too soon!

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 1h ago

PGW sent texts:

these days taerae hyung is always cooking for us

i think he will go into a strike when hanbin hyung comes back lol

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 32 minutes ago

KTR sent texts:

how was your day?
i feel like a mother of three
don't tell hanbin-ssi, but next time we should go on a trip all together, or he stays and i go
i'm not made for this

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 30 minutes ago

KTR sent texts:

of course i heard from hanbin hyung
he's not on the moon
i just need them both back soon.

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 30 minutes ago

KTR sent texts:

why are you all surprised that i'm friends with hao hyung, too?
of course we're friends!!
he's a very good friend to me! i like having him as a friend!!
we text super often!

5stars translations @starsintranslation — just now

KJW sent texts:

did you all see the news?
didn't i do well for my first photoshoot as a model??
aaaaahhh seok matthew is saying i look like i tried too hard, this guy!!!!

5stars translations @starsintranslation — just now

KJW sent texts:

gunwook-ah came to me with a physical copy of the magazine
he asked for an autograph
hahahahhhahah these dongsaeng :(

Hanbin had been waiting patiently for the night to end. Hao's parents had invited some of their family friends over. Fortunately, there were Yifeng's parents, too, and Jianyi's. Which meant that he could at least have the company of some people his age that he'd already met. As sociable as Hanbin was, he didn't exactly look forward to a night with middle-aged people with whom he didn't share a language. Hao, of course, had been kinda monopolized by all the adult guests. Somehow, he tried to get back to the conversation of the youngsters, but it was always short lived, with some of his parents' friends calling him again into their back and forth.

Jianyi was wearing earrings shaped like orange wedges, complete with seeds and all. "So, you do have something planned for Hao's birthday, right?" She said, out of the blue, and her usually friendly demeanor had shifted to something akin to distrustful. "You know it's tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yes," Hanbin replied, feeling her glare seep into his bones. "And yes."

She raised an eyebrow. "Let's hear," she commanded. "Xiao Feng, make sure Hao won't eavesdrop."

Hanbin wished there was a way out of this. But he'd faced worse in his life. He smiled, "So, I have two different gifts. One is the *big* one, like, the serious one, and the other one is a stupid thing." Jianyi nodded, signaling him to go on. God, why did Hao surround himself with terrifying people? "I've bought a cake, too. It's in the fridge, I've told his parents." Was she in awe? She should be. Hanbin had planned this across several weeks, he'd enlisted help from anyone he knew, too. "And tomorrow we're going to the beach. He has no idea about it, he thinks we're visiting his grandmother again. His parents will come to the beach, too, but only in the afternoon. His mother insisted we had a half

day on our own.” Which didn’t make much sense, given that Hao’s mom was perfectly aware they weren’t a real couple. But okay. Hanbin had kinda stopped asking questions that wouldn’t have answers. “And, in the evening, he’ll have dinner with his parents.”

“But where will you be?” Jianyi asked, her voice unexpectedly thin.

Hanbin shrugged. “Here, I guess?” She threw Yifeng a pained glance.

“Ugh,” she groaned. Hanbin asked her what was wrong. “Listen, I’ll be honest. We weren’t really happy about you.” Okay? “Like, we knew that he would sooner or later bring someone home from Korea. But you? You looked a bit too perfect on paper, made us all think that there was something up. Like, you see it too, how improbable it was that Hao would find his perfect match in his same business, right? And that you two would also come out? Together? With this *you and I against the world* attitude? We kinda thought that you would be using him to get something out of it.” She was saying all this so naturally, and at such a speed, that Hanbin couldn’t even manage to be properly upset by all the accusations thrown at him. “And then you’re here and you don’t look any less *perfect* than you did on the news sites. And I don’t want to be the kind of friend that threatens people, but don’t you dare to just switch this damned perfection off from one day to the next. Don’t you try to make a fool out of me, in the first place, because I’m trusting you. I’ll defend you even in front of Chuhua-jie. But you can’t make me regret it, got it?”

Hanbin was speechless. *It’s not that serious*, he wanted to say. *He’s aware that it’s not that serious. We’re going back as friends very soon.* “I’m seriously trying my best,” he said. “Hao hyung’s important to me,” he hadn’t wanted to say this. Where the hell did that come from?

“So should he,” Jianyi smiled once again.

The guests disappeared slowly. The fewer people were left, the closer Hao was to Hanbin. Jianyi and Yifeng had left rather early, claiming some previous plan that they had to honor. Hanbin had the distinct impression that now that the shovel talk was over with, they had concluded their business. Hao looked done. His smile was becoming strained and his shoulders were more slumped with every passing minute. When the last person closed the door behind their own back, Hao groaned loudly. “Mom,” he said. “Never again. Please. I can’t do this.”

She patted him on the shoulder rapidly, and then she proceeded to ask both of them to help with cleaning up the living room.

“How is it that our companies make us work less than she does?” Hao complained, but he still set himself to work. Hanbin just bumped his shoulder against him in support. Hao rolled his eyes.

“Good night, Bin-ah,” Hao was, once again, in his cute pajama, and half standing against the guest room’s door.

“Can’t you come here for five minutes?” Hanbin all but begged. In ten minutes, it would be his birthday. Hanbin had it all planned in his head. If Hao went to sleep, though. How would he let it all play out?

Hao was frowning a bit, but he still walked closer to the bed. “What do you want, you brat?”

Hanbin felt stupid, he wanted everything, but he couldn’t say it. “Just stay here, talk to me,” he said. Hao was trying not to smile, it was so obvious. “Are you happy to be home?”

Hao’s eyes widened, and he sat down, in front of Hanbin, folding his legs on the mattress. “Yeah,” he said. “I’d missed home,” Hanbin would never understand this, he would never understand what it could mean to stay in a different country, for years, without going back home. “And I’d missed those asshole friends I have.”

Hanbin hummed. Hao was looking at him with a calm gaze, a peaceful one. So what if Hanbin wanted time to stop? What if he wanted to have this kind of evening forever? What if he was thinking that this was what they could have for the rest of their life if they only chose to? “They are good friends, hyung,” he said. “They really love you,” Hao deserved to have people who loved him. He deserved all the love in the world.

“You’re a good friend, too,” Hao said, and somehow his hand was on top of Hanbin’s. Hanbin wasn’t sure what he was supposed to answer. He knew two things, at this time. The first was that he wasn’t supposed to be so bad at separating work from feelings, and that he wanted to go straight to Ji Ara in person and beg her to please stop meddling, he could take things into his own hands. He could deal with his own relationship by himself. He needed to. He needed to be free to think about Hao without also thinking about Ji Ara and Mr. Lee in the same space. He needed to understand what he wanted from Hao without them. He needed to focus on this without the image of their signed contract in the back of his eyes. The second thing he knew was that Taerae was going to yell at him when he told him all this. Which meant that he wasn’t going to tell him anything, which made it all even scarier.

“Happy birthday, hyung,” he ended up saying, because the alarm clock on his bedside table read midnight. Hao’s smile widened, and he started laughing quietly. “Wait here, I got you something.”

“Sung Hanbin,” Hao half whined. “Did you make me wait up with you only because of this?”

“Yeah,” Hanbin said, and he brought out a paper bag from the wardrobe, handing it to Hao. “It’s not much,” he warned him. “And maybe-”

Hao was already ripping the bag open. He gasped, as he took out a raccoon plushie. “Yah,” he said, and there wasn’t a single ounce of annoyance in his eyes. Then he noticed something else in the bag. “Hanbin,” he looked at him before pulling the box out. “Hanbin, you’re an asshole. I didn’t get you anything as fancy for your birthday, now look at what you’ve done.” It was just a pair of earrings, it wasn’t like he’d bought him a diamond. Hao was turning them over in his hand. They looked better than they actually were, Hanbin didn’t have the kind of money that would have allowed him to buy actually fancy earrings.

“It’s-”

“Don’t say it’s not much,” Hao cut him off, and he sounded almost really angry. His eyes were shiny, too. He closed his eyes for a second, Hanbin wondered what was wrong with his gift. “Did you pick it yourself?” Hao asked.

“Yes,” Hanbin replied, and Hao scooted closer to him on the mattress. “I thought you’d like them, if you don’t, though, we can go to the shop and change them. It’s near your dorm, I went there because it would be easier if you needed to get a replacement or something.”

“Why don’t you ever stop talking?” Hao sounded- overwhelmed? “Shut up.” Hanbin complied. Hao took a deep breath. “I love everything. And you didn’t have to go to so much trouble for me,” he said. “And, really. Thank you.” Hanbin threw him a small smile. “I’m thankful everyday,” Hao added. “When I’m with you.” Hanbin didn’t get a chance to reply, before Hao’s expression shifted again to an impish smile. “Birthday wish: can I sleep here?”

Hanbin burst out in laughter, then he brought his hands over his mouth, fearing that he would disturb Hao’s parents. Hao’s eyes were shining with glee. Maybe Hanbin wasn’t thinking things through when he accepted. He wasn’t taking into consideration how they’d never shared a bed before, or how Hao’s parents would wake up to seeing them together in the guest room. He didn’t even think about how embarrassing it would be for the both of them when, the next morning, Hao’s father would open the door to his son’s room singing Happy Birthday, only to find it empty. When Hao’s father would open the guest room’s door, finding his son peacefully asleep next to their foreigner guest, only then would Hanbin realize that, possibly, he should have used his brain better.

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — 6h ago

20230725 Hao post on Weibo

[TRANS]

I got to spend my 23rd birthday happily. It’s been a day where I could say that I have everything I need from my life, and where I could spend every hour with no regrets.

I miss my members who are in Korea, but we did video call today and I will see them very soon, too. Don’t miss me too much, my Aw4ke. Your Hao’s had the best birthday he could have.

I have a new friend, and I’ll take him everywhere. It’s in the photos below, it’s a raccoon, and a nice person bought it for me. I still have to pick a name for him, do you have any suggestions?

You know how I said a nice friend gave me the raccoon? Yeah, he also drove me to the beach today. We ate cake, too, and my parents took me to the restaurant to eat steak. It was a very happy day and I was happy to be in my hometown, too. If I’d traveled alone, though, I think this day wouldn’t have been as happy as it was. I’m thankful.

I’ll be home in Seoul very soon, so I will always cherish these pictures and these memories of one of my happiest days.

PS: Thanks for all the birthday wishes!

Hao kept turning his passport in his hands. His mother had gone to buy coffee, and his father was talking to Hanbin, quietly, as if they’d become somewhat close in the span of six days. Hanbin laughed at whatever his dad was saying, and Hao looked away. His mom had told him she had something to say to him, before he embarked on the plane, so, of course, now he was as anxious as he’d ever been.

“Dad,” he warned him, “I’m going to get mom from the café.” Hanbin made to get his suitcase from him and Hao just handed it over, without thinking too much of it. He walked in the direction he’d seen his mother disappear. She was

surely looking at some shop's window, or queueing for the coffee, she wasn't really lost. He wasn't anxious about that, he was just worried about what she was going to tell him. She might tell him that she was displeased that he was going back to Seoul. It was what she'd done the last time, anyway. So, he wasn't starting this conversation with the best mindset. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He checked it quickly. It was his dad. He'd just sent him a photo they'd taken at the zoo. Up to now, all his family photos had featured three people: Hao, his two parents. Needless to say, there were four people in that photo.

"Oh, you showed up," his mother said. She hadn't even entered the café. What a mighty trap she'd laid out for him, to take him away from the other two without asking it herself, without making it evident.

"Did you want to tell me something?" He cut to the chase.

"Sit down," she said. "You've conveniently left your suitcase to your friend, so they can deal with the check-in. I've already instructed your father to do so." Jesus, she was too much. Way too much.

"What's this all about?" He asked, and he did sit down. His mom signaled a waitress to come and get their order. It took her too long to pick what kind of coffee concoction to buy. Hao ordered an iced Americano, banal.

"Oh, it's about you, of course," his mother said, with ease. "Well, mostly it's about that boy and you." Hao took a sip of his Americano to avoid sighing loudly in front of his mother. He didn't want to be rude, because this was already hard as it was. "Hao, what are you going to do with the fact that you're in love with him?"

Hao coughed half of his sip of coffee back up. "What?"

"Oh, please, you're too smart to play dumb with me," she said, and she smiled at the waitress who took her credit card. "This *publicity stunt* or whatever it was, it started like that and now you're in love with him. I'm not complaining about that. I'm asking, what are you going to do about it?"

Hao had his back to the wall. His mother had always had the habit of laying things out pretty clearly, in such a way that no one could ignore them. Hao had grown up to be someone way less direct, maybe as a consequence of that. Huh. Food for thought. "I'm going to wait until the end of our publicity contract," he said. "And, once the obligation to spend time together is removed, I'm going to talk openly to him." He felt like he was negotiating contracts with one of his managers and not having a conversation with his mother.

"And what will you tell him?" She said, and now she looked like she was a lawyer coaching a witness to appear in court in a Western movie.

Hao took another sip of coffee. "That even if the charade has to end, it doesn't mean our relationship has to end, too. That I'm happy to have met him," he looked down. He wouldn't examine every single layer to his feelings for Hanbin in front of his mother. It wasn't her business. "Why?"

His mother studied him, then she drank half her cup of coffee and milk and whatever syrup was in it. "He's one of a kind," she said, tranquil. "You won't find another man like him, and not because he's handsome and he dances well and he's a colleague of yours, in a way." Hanbin told himself not to frown, not to give his mother the satisfaction of having gotten a reaction from him. "He's good to you," she said, and Hao's face fell. "And he's good to you in a spontaneous way. He's a good person, and it shows. He went to a lot of trouble to plan your birthday, he reserved a cake on his own, with his *terrible* Mandarin," Hao laughed. "He bought you gifts, he looked up where to spend the day with you. He cares, Hao." Hao knew that. It wasn't like he thought Hanbin hated him. He knew Hanbin cared about him. He just didn't know if Hanbin might want to *date* him. For real. "He never complained about anything, for a whole week. He was in a foreign country, with people he didn't know, and he only ever smiled. Your grandmother, do you want to know what she said after you went to see her?"

"Tell me, mom," Hao said. He couldn't wait to be seated on the plane back to Shanghai.

"She said that she thought that living abroad has done you well," she said this with no happiness. His mother had always been against his move to Korea. It wasn't like she would change his mind in a week, and only because of Hanbin. Even he wasn't that powerful. "And that you looked like a happy young man. And that your friend had made tea for her, and you'd told her that he was good at it because his mother runs a café. Your grandmother asked me if you and he live alone, together. It was a bit funny," his mom conceded. "To hear your eighty-year old grandmother tell about the fact that she'd heard that some men do that, live without wives, and with other men. She made sure to explain it to me very thoroughly."

Hao took a deep breath. "Did you tell her that we work as entertainers, too? Or is that harder to accept than homosexuality?"

His mother had the decency to look away for a moment. "I haven't always been accepting of your decisions," what an understatement. "But I'll support your decision to stay with Hanbin, Hao. I honestly think it's a good thing. For

you.”

It had never happened, ever since Hao had turned eighteen, that his mother openly stated that she was proud of anything he'd done. “Okay,” he said.

“You know you can count on me for anything, don't you?” She said. “I love you, Hao,” maybe it was the first time he was hearing this since he'd stopped attending primary school. “When I disagree with you, it's because I want the best for you.”

He swallowed some more Americano. “I know,” he replied. He sighed. “I love you too, mom,” he said. “Even when you're the hardest to please.” She huffed a laugh. “But can I say that I'm vaguely pleased that you had to be shown by grandma what it's like to be a bit more open-minded?”

His mother laughed again, way less stiff than she'd been when they'd started talking. “Let's get something to drink for your dad,” she said. Hao raised his eyebrows, waiting for the blow to be dealt. “And for the boy you're wooing, too.” And there it was.

He hugged his dad tight, right in front of the security controls line. He held onto him a bit too long, for a man his age. But he didn't care much, he just wanted to say goodbye to his parents and he wanted to do it well. He moved on to his mother, and then he looked in awe as his mother, the harpy, the person who'd never had kind words to spare for no one, hugged Hanbin of her own initiative. “It was great to meet you,” she said, to Hao's amazement. “I really hope I'll see you again. Soon.”

Hanbin stepped away from the hug, his ears were completely red. “If you ever need a place to stay in Seoul,” he replied, and the blush was spreading to his cheeks. Hao caught himself smiling. “My family will surely love to have you as our guests.”

“Let's go,” Hao said, and he half pushed Hanbin to join the queue in front of the metal detectors. “We'll be late. Let's go.” Hanbin laughed and waved at Hao's parents. “Go,” Hao said, again. Hanbin's smile, as he turned to look at Hao, was blinding. “Quick, quick,” Hao rolled the word in his mouth.

It was after, when they were standing in line to be boarded, that Hao gave voice to a thought he'd been having for a while. “I know I always act like I'm allergic to sweet things,” he began. “Maybe I really am, so I'll keep it short. I didn't think that having you here this week would make it better. I thought it would be good, as coming home always is. But you made it better, somehow.” Somehow, meaning, by the sheer virtue of being Sung Hanbin, Hao's perfect not-(yet)-boyfriend. “My parents loved you, my grandma too. I think my mom's finally at peace with me living in Seoul.” Hanbin wasn't saying anything, for once. He was quick to wrap it up. “So thank you. For not pulling back when you could have. For going along with the stupid request of ditching your schedules for this trip.” Hanbin smiled. “And for putting up with the three hundred times where you could've just said you and I aren't dating for real, but you just chose to back me up when I wanted to shove it down some people's throat.” Hanbin let out a loud bark of laughter, then he caught himself and closed his eyes in embarrassment. Hao stepped up and kissed his cheek. Quickly. Then he backed off and walked up to the steward that was welcoming travelers towards the plane.

He was comfortably sitting on his bed, hugging a silly, colorful pillow, and he turned the live streaming on. It had been a while since he'd done one by himself, what with the fact that lately the group schedule had been packed. People started tuning into his stream with surprising speed. The numbers had seriously turned over in a few months. He had to give it to Ji Ara. She might be the cause for the fact that Hanbin was a complete mess and couldn't have a normal thought in a whole day — ever since he'd come back from China his head had been something — but she knew the business game she was playing.

“Hi,” he said. “I'll be quick, I think. Just until the kids come back from their shower and we all go to sleep,” he explained. Matthew was currently occupying the bathroom, while Taerae was still in the living room. He was always the last one to go, anyway, so Hanbin believed he had some time in his hands. The comments started pouring in, too. Most of them not really complex, variations of *You look good* or *I love you* or *You guys are my life*. He smiled at them, however. “Mh, I don't know what I should tell you guys,” he reasoned. “Oh, today we filmed something really cool.” New comeback. And so soon. It felt like a dream, to finally be working with some real rhythm, after years of collecting dust. “Who looked the coolest?” A comment had been asking that. “I think the one who suited today's vibe the most was Gunwookie, but he almost fits every vibe. He just... how does our maknae have such a cool vibe? He's always the

coolest. We raised him well, didn't we?" If there was something Hanbin would always take pride in was how he'd basically acted as a surrogate parent for Gunwook ever since he'd joined their agency.

How was China? "Oh, my trip to China. I was sad I couldn't attend the festivals with Stars, but China was incredible," Hanbin hadn't really thought much about how he was basically missing out on his actual job. His whole mind had been occupied with something else. He'd entered some kind of survival mode, where the thing he was trying to survive from was forming any kind of thought that might lead to questioning his attachment to Hao. "I mean, I haven't seen much of it, but I think I'll try to go back and visit some more cities the next time? If hyung will go with me it'll be even better." *Ohhhhhhhh. Why am I single???? And Hao is so lucky!!!! And I wonder if they'll go around the world together . And I hope you're together forever . But also I hate that you only talk about your boyfriend . And also, just because, some words that were borderline insulting. Hanbin swiped them away. It was useless, anyway. Did you eat hotpot?* "Oh, yeah, we ate hotpot on our last evening! It was amazing, the best I've ever had."

What did you buy for Hao's birthday ? Followed by a completely out of pocket *Did you kiss Hao at midnight on his bday?* "Mh, you saw the plushie, maybe? The raccoon? Hao hyung's raccoon? We visited a zoo and it reminded me of him, so I thought that he should have it," he said. "No," he said, answering to an incredulous comment. "That wasn't the only thing I prepared! Yah, you guys. I know how to give presents, come on."

He's not telling us what the gift was, fine. So what if Hanbin wasn't telling? Did they have to know everything? Just because they had to make it palatable for the public then he had no right to keep anything for himself? *How did you get together?* A user asked. *Did you confess first or did Hao?* And *How did you fall in love?* Fuck. Was he supposed to divert their attention to something else? Maybe he could get away with spoiling something for the comeback. His phone vibrated.

AJEnt SeHee Noona (PR Team)

answer them .

God, he hated them. All of them. "Actually," Hanbin started, praying that his imagination and creativity could come to his help. "You know how hyung and I filmed that TikTok challenge all those months ago?" He looked a bit away. "Mh, that wasn't really the first time we had met. It might look like that, but we had been attending some of the same dance seminars and events in the past. Hao hyung and I, we had been friends for a while." Was this him making up a story or was it him voicing his deepest wishes? "So, after we filmed the TikTok, we decided to hang out for a while, and," he stopped, laughing a bit. It had been so awkward, in reality. He remembered being completely terrified by Hao's cleverness. "This is so stupid, in a way. But, have you ever had the feeling that someone is your perfect other half? And the more you get to know them, the more evident it becomes? So, we were having coffee and I was thinking that it was insane that we never spent much time together, despite being acquainted with each other." He laughed again. He must look like an idiot. "Anyway, I think we both started making up random excuses to meet again. There were a couple weeks where we would just make up the weirdest occasions to go out together, like, we once went to shop for new socks at the department store." This had happened. Last week, though. Well, no one had to know. And Hanbin didn't have to think about it. "Anyway, after that it was very natural, we always went out together, as I've said. And then, just before Hao hyung had his comeback with Aw4ke, we ended up talking until very late in the night. And," and what. Who of them would have caved first? "You know, Hao hyung never says things very directly. But anyway, you know how these things go. A person says something, another says something else, and things get clearer and then—" He cleared his throat. He hoped it didn't seem entirely unbelievable. "I've never found it as easy to be in sync with someone else, so, even if we haven't been together for long, it's really easy to be with each other. We just *get* each other? When we're talking, it's easy. It's like I never have to explain anything, because Hao hyung just *gets* it? Sometimes I don't even have to say anything..." he trailed off. Maybe he should wrap it up. Some of the things he was saying were a bit too true, and he, honestly, was still in his no-thoughts mode. It hurt — his head and his stomach both — if he thought about it. *True love*, someone commented. All lies, actually. "Oh, my roommates are back," he lied, again. "Have a good night, my darlings!"

Two hours later, with Matthew and Taerae sleeping soundly in his same room, he was still laying awake. He wished it was the first night he couldn't get a wink of sleep, but it was a miracle if he slept three hours in a row, these days. Ever since he'd come back from Fuzhou, his brain had been frying. It was becoming a problem, but if he wanted to talk about it, people would ask things like "Oh, why didn't you sleep? Did you have something on your mind? Are you worried about something?" Hanbin wouldn't know how to reply. Something on his mind? Maybe the general

sadness that he was constantly lying to his fans? Maybe the desperation that the tale he'd just told — and that would surely make the rounds on all social media in no time — about how he'd basically been maneuvered by Hao into confessing to him was only a lie. That their story would never be as pure and beautiful as the one their fan had just heard. That he hadn't actually gotten to cheer up Hao before his comeback with a first kiss that had opened a beautiful romance. If he could do it all differently, he would. If he could go back to the time Ji Ara had sat him down and offered him to pretend to date another singer just to save their careers, he would have begged to let him hang out with Hao in his own time, without forcing them together. Hanbin would have still done the most to get close to him, but maybe he wouldn't have the weight in his stomach that came with the knowledge that Hao and him had only become close because of having to fake said closeness in the first place.

“Hyung, I can hear the gear turning in your heads,” Matthew groaned from the bunk bed on top of his. “Just sleep.”

5stars Hanbin tells wholesome love story

In a recent live stream the idol has given his fans more details about how his romance with colleague Zhang Hao (Aw4ke) started. Fans of both groups shared happiness about the genuine feelings the idol described, talking about a “wholesome tale of first love between two young men”.

user 345255 commented:

They're a very cute couple. However, people should focus on the music they make and not on their private lives this much.

user 879626 commented:

Hanbin looks like an idiot in love when he speaks about Hao, and Hao is always equally flustered. It's a cute couple.

user 189751 commented:

I hate that this is normalized to the point that no one bothers to tell them that they're letting down a whole side of their fandoms. This isn't right. They should break up or leave their groups. This isn't right.

user 908715 commented:

I can understand that people have their own preferences, but they should know that we don't care about them. The way he told this, too. It's not wholesome. He hinted at dirty things and he should know better than to let people presume that the two of them get down to certain activities.

user 754169 commented:

They're 23 and 24 respectively. They're old enough to do what they want with themselves. And he didn't even say anything weird. He kept it vague on purpose, if anything.

Male idols dating each other and the worry of mothers.

Recently, I've spoken to a friend, a mother of two teenagers. Her daughter is a hardcore supporter of idol group Aw4ke, whose leader has often been making headlines not for his artistic merits (which, admittedly, are notable), but for his relationship with another idol, another male idol.

My friend shared her worry about her daughter's easy acceptance of this situation, saying that she has no idea how to face the issue with her. She can't let her daughter believe that such relationships are as normal as woman-man ones, but she can't fight about it with her daughter either, because then she will accuse her of being a bad mother.

Mostly, though, she's worried about her son, who might end up thinking that this is the model that is being promoted to him. “What if my son thinks that he, to, has to do like his sister's idols?”

What do you readers think about it, is it right that so called “idols” promote such lifestyle choices as this one? Should they make it easier for families to raise their kids? Or should they just act like the flawed people they are?

Hao's patience was being tested to a new level. The bullshit they had to deal with on a regular basis was suddenly being *amped up* , only because a wide range of journalists and interviewers had decided that keeping their mouths shut wasn't an option.

Not only had he had to watch Stars Gunwook and Taerae being interviewed on the values of marriage on a talk show that usually had its guests play mafia games (it was fun, usually, because people from different backgrounds were put together and it usually created some chaos), now he had to sit through an interview with a magazine that was being held by the single dumbest person he'd ever met. And he knew a lot of dumb people. Quanrui was losing his cool, and it was something rare, because he was often criticized for not being expressive enough, while all he was doing now was frowning. Seungeon had already signaled their manager to change the question twice. Once when this stupid man had asked them to indicate what was the trait they hated most of each other. Then, again, when he'd asked if there was something they regretted about the last year. *I.e. personal matters, relationships, interpersonal experiences* .

“Not on the list,” Yunho, their manager, the one guy who'd been with them since the beginning, pointed out, without much verve. “Please stick to the list,” he was using his flight-attendant voice. The questions had been approved by the company, as always. Which was helpful, because this meant that they could actually refuse to answer what they didn't want to. Sure, it happened that sometimes they went off-script, but that was the reason why their managers had to still approve things before they got printed. This man here, however, was doing the most to get them to say something rude, on purpose.

“Hao-ssi,” the interviewer said. Hao nodded. “You've made yourself a name as a promoter of civil rights,” *what?* “Does this clash with your job as an idol? Does this put you at odds with your group members?”

He dared to glance at Yunho, who shrugged. “I think,” Hao said, slowly and carefully. “That I have a platform that allows me to speak to a good number of people, and it would be a waste not to share my opinions on matters that I care about. As a group, we've repeatedly attended charity events held by children education funds, we've spoken multiple times about the environment and about the need to have better care for lower-income citizens, too.” This last issue had been fun to discuss in a previous interview, he and Quanrui had been dragged on social media because of that. Chinese government propaganda agents, they'd called them. Except for the fact that it had been Gyuvin who'd spoken about it, and who'd talked for five minutes straight about that. *It's unfair* , he'd kept repeating , *and I can't stand unfair situations* .

“Sure,” the interviewer agreed. “And I'm sure you will speak up about marriage equality, too, sooner or later. Or, maybe, your members disagree?”

Hao didn't get to think of what he would have liked to reply. Gyuvin was already up on his feet, and the chair he'd been sitting on had scraped the floor with an unpleasant screech. “This is ridiculous,” he proclaimed. “And I don't care what you will write about us, about *me* , but I'm leaving and they're leaving with me. Yunho hyung, get the car, please.” Hao tried to think about how to fix this. How could he get Gyuvin to calm down? How could he get the journalist not to report them as rude people all around?

“It's just a question,” the interviewer said. “And it was for Hao-ssi.”

Gyuvin wiggled himself free of Seungeon's grasp on his shoulders — trying to hold him back — and took one more step towards the interviewer. Yunho stepped up, too. Hao was paralyzed. He should just try to answer. “I,” he said.

“It's not *just a question* ,” Gyuvin's voice was seeping rage. “You've been trying to bait us into saying something awful about Hao hyung for, like, forty minutes. We're not going to say it. You can try as long as you like, but you won't get us saying that we wished he'd stayed silent about his identity, or that he shouldn't have gone public about it.” Hao felt sick. He should find a toilet quickly. He got up, too. Quanrui lay a hand on his arm, a silent question. *Are you all right?* Hao shook his head. “I don't know if you're stupid or an outright asshole,” Gyuvin went on. Yunho stepped between him and the journalist. “But whatever the cause, you can print whatever the fuck you want on your stupid magazine. We're proud of hyung. We've always been. Way before this stuff came out. And we'll always be proud of him.”

“Gyuvin-ah,” Yunho said, his voice stern.

“No,” Gyuvin interrupted him. “I'm old enough to take a position. I'll take the consequences, too. But this isn't

okay. You wouldn't be trying to get us to spit hate on a member's private life if he'd gone out with a girl, instead. It's discriminatory, and I won't pretend otherwise." Hao left the room.

He asked a younger secretary where the toilet was, and he closed a stall door behind his back, before leaning against it. What a fucking mess. They weren't going to be able to come out of this clean. This would haunt them forever. It wasn't like Gyuvin had been wrong, either. Hao wasn't angry with him. But, why did they have to bear the consequences of people's narrow-mindedness? It wasn't a weight that was fair for them to bear, not for Gyuvin, not for Seungeon, not for Quanrui. It was Hao's burden, not theirs. He was strong enough to face people's rude opinions, he'd been doing it for a long time. But they had no fault, they didn't have to support him unconditionally, to the point of being hurt along with him.

"Hyung," Seungeon's voice was quiet on the other side of the door. "Hyung, we're leaving, as soon as you're ready. Yunho hyung said he'll talk to the directing board of the magazine, but he said Kimgyu was right. He's not angry. You don't have to get out right now," Hao hated that everyone was so fucking nice to him. "We'll wait downstairs."

"I don't want to go home," he said, before he thought about it.

"This was your last thing today," Seungeon replied, still calm. "I think you can go where you want," this wasn't true. Of course it wasn't. They didn't have that much free agency. Hao laughed, bitter.

"Go," he said. "I'm making a call and then I'll join you."

He was sitting on the toilet seat, with the lid closed, as if it was a kind of weird stool. Hanbin wasn't picking up. He must be busy with something. Hao ran through the media they'd exchanged, looking for the pdf with 5stars schedule for the week. One of them had to be free, they had to. He forced himself to take a collected breath. An incoming call monopolized his screen. "Tell me you're home," he said, without letting Hanbin say anything.

"I'm at the studio," he said, instead. "We were re-recording something that came out horrible," Hao hated everything. "Do you want to come and pay a visit?"

"No," Hao was quick to reply. "I want not to see anyone," he admitted. Hanbin was silent on the other end. "Something happened," he said. "It's not worrisome, we're fine, I'm just upset," he added quickly.

"The code to our door," Hanbin said, without missing a beat. "Is 3791, all odd numbers under ten with the exclusion of five, but not in the most obvious order, because otherwise the thieves would get it," Hanbin's voice was a bit too composed, as if he was trying not to let Hao worry any further. "There's no one right now, but I think we'll all get home together. So, if that's not ideal for you—"

"I'll see you there," Hao cut him off. "Maybe I'll find somewhere to get dinner," he also said, because he didn't know whether he felt like seeing Hanbin's group mates all at once.

"I hope we'll be done soon," Hanbin hesitated. "Hyung," a beat of silence. "Take care, okay?"

Matthew was sitting on Hanbin's mattress when he came home. He was hugging his pillow and he was scrolling through social media, judging by the bored expression he was wearing. "We need to talk," he said, as soon as Hanbin walked through the door of their shared room. "I think we should have had this talk a while back, to be fair," he concluded.

Hanbin picked up his shorts from the hanger that was precariously balanced at the end of Matthew's top bunk. He took off his jeans, put the shorts on and plopped down on the bed, in front of Matthew. It was cramped. "Spit it out."

Matthew put his phone away. "Okay," he held eye contact with Hanbin for a bit too long. "I won't beat around the bush. I believe you should put some boundaries between you and Hao hyung." Hanbin wanted to protest, but Matthew held up a hand. "The sooner you start putting some distance back between the two of you, the better it will be when Ara-ssi and her minions will tell the two of you to break up. You've noticed how different your schedules are already. They're not as aligned as they were a month ago, they're doing it on purpose, they don't care anymore. You've done your job, so it's time to start wrapping it up."

"Did Jiwoong hyung talk to her?" Hanbin's hands were suddenly cold, yet they were sweating.

"No," Matthew said. "This is just me being clever and smart and all around amazing," he was completely serious. Hanbin must have made some kind of face. "Hyung, I know you and him are kind of attached at the hip these days. But it won't be possible, going on, to keep it up like this."

“Why?” Hanbin could be stubborn if he wanted to. And this was just the kind of situation that made him want to be stubborn.

Matthew was visibly trying not to roll his eyes. “You know why,” he said. Hanbin didn’t know. “You’ve become close just because you had to, don’t kid yourself, hyung. When there’s no more forced proximity, do you really think you’ll hang out like you do now? When people stop caring about it? When people stop accommodating your *stupid* ideas?”

Hanbin didn’t want to fight with him. “If you thought that letting him come over the other day was a stupid idea, you could have said so sooner,” he said, as calmly as he managed. “I’m sorry if it made you feel somewhat invaded. I should’ve consulted you all before giving away our passcode and all.”

Matthew looked mad. He raised his eyebrows. “You *think* ?” Okay, maybe Hanbin had overstepped. But where was Hao supposed to run to? Was he supposed to let him roam around random places in the city until he calmed down? Wasn’t this what friends did for each other?

“But wouldn’t you do this for a friend?” He was asking honestly. He didn’t already have an answer in his mind. “Wouldn’t you try to be of help?”

Matthew groaned, softly. Hanbin didn’t understand what was so frustrating for him. He felt like he should apologize again. Just for putting him through this. “Hyung,” he whined. “But why are you friends with him, in the first place?”

What did that have to do with anything? Whatever their beginning had been caused by, they were friends now. “Because I get along with him,” he said, and, again, he knew he sounded stubborn. “Do I need a better reason? Do I need an official reason to be friends with him? You’ll say that I’m friends with him only because of this stunt, so because of work. But isn’t that the same with all of us? Aren’t you and I friends because we’ve trained together and we debuted together? Aren’t people friends because they meet at school or at sports practice? Why does it matter how I’ve met Hao?”

Matthew sighed. “I’m not saying that,” but he was. And now he was backtracking, because he’d realized that it was a stupid reasoning. “I’m just saying that *maybe* you should be careful before turning over your whole life for someone you’ve met because of a publicity stunt and whom you *had* to like, almost by necessity. Just. Again. Some distance. You don’t have to stop talking to him from one day to the next, just go back to only doing the media stuff.”

Hanbin wasn’t going to listen to him. No matter how Matthew had been one of his best friends for the best part of five years. “Is it because you don’t like him?”

“I wish,” Matthew heaved another sigh. “I actually like him a lot, hyung.” He seemed to contemplate something to say, but, in the end, he shook his head. “Have you been sleeping a bit better lately?”

Hanbin hugged his own knees. He hadn’t. He was contemplating asking his manager to get him a doctor’s appointment, as this looked like something that wouldn’t go away in a day. “Yeah,” he said. “Headache’s been better too,” another lie. He was just getting used to having a migraine all day long. “Maybe it was just the sudden heatwave,” he theorized.

“Might be,” Matthew nodded along. “Jiwoong hyung said that he still has some melatonin-laced infusions, if you wanted. To help you sleep.” Hanbin hadn’t complained to Jiwoong about not sleeping, which meant that this was Matthew snitching his business around.

“Your boyfriend can keep them,” Hanbin replied, with a kind smile. “I *am* doing better,” Matthew didn’t need to know about the reality of Hanbin’s persistent sleepless nights. Matthew slapped his knee. It hurt. “Ow?”

“He’s *not* my boyfriend,” he said, in a loud whisper.

“And *why* isn’t he?” Hanbin chased after his answer nosily. One, because he was interested. Two, because it made for a valid change of topic.

Matthew’s cheeks were now a bit too red. “Don’t rush things, hyung,” he said, without meeting his gaze.

“Matt,” he said, almost laughing in the process. “You’ve been doing things way beyond the boyfriend label,” he wasn’t going to start enumerating the late evenings they’d both had in the last two months alone. “So?”

“I don’t know if you want to open the boyfriend behavior discussion, hyung,” Matthew’s smile was back to teasing. “Or do I need to remind you about what is on the back of your phone case?” Hanbin’s phone case wasn’t transparent. How did Matthew know about the Polaroid photo that was there?

“Do I need to mention your lock screen, then?” Hanbin could fight this war. He could even win it, if he managed to take his mind away from the fact that, then, Matthew had seen the photo he’d taken with Hao on the beach, way back in Fujian. They had their eyes closed, both of them, it was out of focus, and it wasn’t even centered in the right way. It

was the worst photo Hanbin had ever taken with anyone.

“Do I need to bring up your attempt to cook dim sum last Sunday?” A failure on all fronts. At least they’d gotten to do some deep cleaning of their kitchen.

“Ha,” he laughed. “Then what about the framed photo above your bed?” He thought this would be the winning blow, he was sure about it.

“You don’t want me to bring up the Chinese grammar book on top of your *other* university books,” Matthew was smirking, smug.

“This doesn’t count,” he argued. “You were bilingual for all your life, this is a low blow.”

“Sucks to be you,” Matthew shrugged. Hanbin was only glad that, once again, he’d managed not to upset him too much.

taerrorist

> *hanbin hyung*

> *i need a ride tomorrow pls*

hanbinsung

> *sure!*

> *where are we going?*

terrorist

> *to pick up my car from the mechanic*

> *FINALLY*

> *longest battery substitution EVER*

hanbinsung

> *yay!*

> *great!!*

> *back to being cool kids with too many cars for our own finances!*

terrorist

> *listen, i was still paying for that parking space even while it was at the shop*

> *sooooo*

> *also jiwoong hyung’s car should get washed. i’ll tell him loll*

hanbinsung

> *you’re really the worst??*

Hao was carrying a clean pair of shoes in a paper bag. He was pretty sure he looked completely done with his life. He’d spent the last three *full* days rehearsing some new choreo for a comeback that was scheduled in a couple of months. They still hadn’t recorded anything, but the dance instructors had wanted them to start getting familiar with a lot of technical elements they hadn’t ever tried before. If he was honest, he just wanted to find a couch and sleep for three hours straight. Little did it matter that his neck would hurt like crazy. Quanrui had found an old martial arts mattress somewhere in the studios and was currently using it as his mattress. It was their only long pause of the day, so everyone was trying to fit in as much relaxation and energizing as possible. Gyuvin had gone to collect some food from the cafeteria. His exploit at the magazine building had earned him only a light scolding, but he was still on a sort of watchlist from the managers.

Hao opened a door to a changing room. It was empty. He sat, his back against the wall. He heaved a sigh. He took his phone out of his pocket. There were a few notifications from Taerae, who was watching a drama Hao had suggested to him and was sending over some comments. Of course, there were a lot of texts from Hanbin. He set out to read them, willing to give him all the time he deserved. The door to the changing room opened.

“Oh,” it was the baby who’d been hanging out with Gyuvin a while ago. What was his name? Yujin? Might be. “Sorry, I’ll go to the next one,” he said.

Hao waved it off. “Nah, stay here, I’m just getting some alone time,” he smiled, as kindly as he could. “Is practice going well?”

The child sat down on the opposite side of the room and he actually started changing his clothes. He was so skinny. “Yes,” he replied, politely. “The instructors are mostly satisfied, even though they’re running us down. But we’re keeping up with them, and I guess we should be proud of it.” He wasn’t wrong. Hao nodded, and he considered whether he should leave him to get changed in peace, going back to his texts from Hanbin.

“Are you eating well?” He asked, instead, because he remembered skipping a lot of meals, back then.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” again, the kid was overly formal. “We’re eating a bit more than they say we should,” he said, with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Secretly.”

Hao laughed, “I won’t tell on you,” he smiled. “We should have done the same.”

A comfortable silence fell over the two of them. Hao picked back his phone, reading quietly through the tale of how a bee had made its way inside of Jiwoong and Gunwook’s room, sending both of them into a panic. He planned to react to the messages by looking for a fitting sticker or animated gif.

“Zhang Hao hyung,” Yujin’s voice echoed a bit through the room, clear and bright. “This may seem awkward and maybe the tiniest bit cringe.” Hao looked up at him. He was standing, with his eyes angled towards the floor and his bag on his shoulder. He looked ready to leave. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

“Whatever for?” Hao inquired, softly.

“You’re a great example,” he said, raising his gaze, and then averting it again. “You’re a great performer, you’ve got an amazing voice and you dance wonderfully, and it’s inspiring to watch you on stage. But,” he went on with some kind of decision that was almost surprising to witness. “That’s not all. These last few months you’ve set a different kind of example of honesty and sincerity that no one else can claim for themselves, and you’ve shown us- *me*, that the most important thing in the world is to be ourselves, however other people might take it.” Hao didn’t know what to say. “I know I will never understand what you went through and the ugly things you’ve had to face, even recently, because I don’t think I’ll get to hear them addressed to me. But it’s been amazing to see you stand tall and proud, without stepping back, sure that the best version of you you could ever be was the one truest to yourself. And I wish you’ll never regret what you’ve chosen, and you’ll never wish you’d done this differently, because it has already made an impact in so many peoples’ lives. And I can’t begin to tell you how much I wish for you and Hanbin-ssi to be happy and to keep sharing the beautiful feelings you share, because seeing the two of you do what you did was life-changing. I’m sorry if I said all of this unprompted but I thought you deserved to hear it from your junior in this company that we’re all admired by you and that nothing will change our mind, because we, too, want to be liked by people for being genuine and honest and true to ourselves.”

Hao’s eyes were prickling with tears at this kid’s well-spokenness and at the strength with which he’d communicated his feelings. “I should be the one thanking you,” he managed to say. His voice came out a bit shaky. “You’ve said such beautiful words to me, Yujin-ah.”

Yujin let out a very thin smile. “I mean all of this,” he said. It was obvious.

“Can I share this story with Hanbin?” It was out before he even thought about telling Hanbin this. But it was obvious that he would have wondered, eventually, whether to share this with him. It wasn’t like they didn’t talk about their days.

Yujin was smiling a lot wider. “Of course,” he said. “I didn’t dare to ask but by all means. Whatever I said about you, Hao hyung, goes for him, too.” Hao had to blink away some of the tears pooling in his eyes. He nodded, silently.

“Okay,” he said. “Listen, can I hug you?”

The rest of Hao’s day went by in a blur. He only got to think about Han Yujin’s little speech while he was lying in bed and waiting to fall asleep. It warmed his heart. It made him feel a bit like an impostor, too, because Yujin had been going on and on about honesty and sincerity and Hao’s story wasn’t entirely born out of honesty. Scratch that, he’d only managed to come out because of a contorted lie. The insincere nature of the premises didn’t erase the positive consequences they had reaped, anyway, which was what mattered most. If he looked close enough into it, the lie was getting thinner and thinner every day. He liked Hanbin, sincerely. That had never been a lie in the first place. It had taken a grand total of ten hours spent with him to make Hao crumble. He spent more time with Hanbin — if one took into consideration the calls and texts too — than most people actually did with their partners, so their frequentation

was also kinda true. Sure, they didn't get to do some of the fun things one's supposed to do with a boyfriend, but Hao had realized on his plane from Shanghai to Incheon that he could wait twenty years more to kiss Hanbin, as long as he got to spend time with him. He could live a life of sublimation of his desires, if it meant that he got to still see Hanbin's smile and his stupid dimples. He wanted to kiss him, of course he did. And he wanted to do the rest too. And if he thought about it he could surely come up with a good set of things they could do. But it didn't matter, in comparison to the sheer want to have Hanbin in his same space, to get to talk to him, to get to see his face and hear his voice. Oh, Hao was fucked and he liked it. So, honestly, that was the degree their lie amounted to: not having actually decided to date each other. As for the rest, there was more truth than lie: they were both actually gay men, whichever negativity they got for that it was true, but whatever praise they received for being honest was true, too. And their faked relationship had surely been a catalyst to some people's bitching, but Hao was sure that they'd done something good. Something that went beyond making their companies earn more money. Something that meant the entire world to other people like them, and to people who cared about others, in general.

janghao

> hanbin-ah i'm still thinking about that junior today, at the company. he said a lot of nice things to me, and, by extension, to you, too. it's been the first time that i've felt that you and i aren't just replenishing our companies' bank accounts.

> i want you to know that i do believe some people around the world will be a tiny bit happier because of you and i

> i don't know why i'm texting you this, it's one AM, but i can't stop thinking about it

> and i think that sharing good things can only lead to more good things

> please try to get some sleep, okay?

> i wish i could see you soon, how is it that we're both so busy that we don't get to find one hour to be together?

Bin <3

> hyung

> hyung you're making me cry

janghao

> you think i'm not crying, too?

> get some sleep, won't you?

Bin <3

> i'll try to, for sure.

> sleep well, hao

janghao

[> draft: what can i do to help you sleep better]

Hanbin was sitting in his parked car in the company's building. He was coming back to the rehearsal rooms from lunch with Ji Ara, Lee Ryutak and Hao. He should be happy that he'd got to see Hao after two whole weeks of only being able to hear from him via text. He was miserable. He was the most unhappy he'd felt in the last year, probably and there wasn't any real reason for this, either. The food was great, sushi of the highest quality in an amazing location with a stunning view of the river. It would have made everyone happy. He wasn't. "We invited you to eat out with us," Lee Ryutak had said, "to express our gratitude to you. The last five months have seen a huge jump in our sales, and your impact in this achievement can't be overlooked." The lunch had progressed without any real event. Ji Ara had told a few stories about her recent trip to the United States — her daughter had been ecstatic — and Lee Ryutak had answered with a tale about his wife's rhinoplasty. Hanbin hadn't really listened to any of this, Hao was sitting in front of him and he hadn't stopped staring at Hanbin for two consecutive seconds. It felt like Hao was trying to memorize his face all over again, as if he was trying to paint it in his memory forever. It made Hanbin's appetite thin down to nothing, because all he wanted was to take Hao by the hand and run away with him, riding the elevator to the ground

floor and maybe even lower, to a place where only the two of them could exist. All he wanted was to touch his hands to Hao's face and feel the warmth of his skin, the way he was alive and *here*. He'd missed him in a way he didn't know it was possible to miss a person you hear from every day. He'd missed him in a way he thought only the heroes of old legends had missed their beloved. Normal people in the year 2023 didn't miss each other like that. *Each other*. Maybe Hao hadn't missed him that much. His appetite twinkled down to nothing. He still forced the food down his own throat. He wouldn't let it go to waste and he wasn't going to be rude, *and* he wasn't going to let Hao worry.

"We're really thankful to the two of you," Ji Ara said, when the waiters had brought their empty plates away. There was only a bottle of Italian white wine left on the table, and their glasses. Hanbin's was empty. It had been empty for most of the meal. The last thing he needed was to get drunk. "And we're aware that we've asked a huge sacrifice on your end, so maybe you will be pleased to hear that we're thinking of letting it come to a natural end."

Hanbin felt the turn of his head towards Ara as if he wasn't the one responsible for it. He felt the breath he was holding get stuck in his throat and come out like a wheeze. He felt the muscles in his neck and his thighs stiffen. "Pardon?"

She laughed. Hanbin was feeling *ill* and she laughed. "Of course, we can't announce it to the media so soon, it would look bad. You've only just started dating, in their eyes." No, Hanbin thought. They hadn't *yet*. They hadn't had the time to. They- "So we're just thinking to slow down your media appearances for a while, spacing them out throughout the other members a bit more. Paparazzi stunts, too. Let's have them focus on other people, for a while, okay?"

"So we're not to hang out anymore?" Hao's voice sounded distant, and it also sounded rigid, mechanic. None of its usual musicality, the foreign lilt that sometimes emerged, especially when he was laughing.

Lee Gyutak laughed out loud. "You guys have become such good friends," Hanbin wanted to scream. "It would be insane to tell you not to see each other anymore. Of course, you can hang out, we won't stop you from doing that. And, honestly, if you're sometimes seen together, it won't hurt. But, you're free from any obligations." Hanbin dared to look at Hao, who looked unreadable, though. His face was closed off, like it used to be before Hanbin learned how to read everything it could convey. His heart was beating too loud.

"Ah," Ji Ara went on. "We'll discuss it further later on, but we'll have to get your agreement on a break-up notice, sooner or later." Hanbin suddenly thought that he might not agree to that, that the day may come when they asked him to sign on a paper allowing them to put out that one announcement and he would simply refuse to. Let the whole world still think that he and Hao were together. Let them all be victims to this fucking ploy, let it turn against them.

"I trust it's all clear," Lee Ryutak said. "It shouldn't be much of a change for you, however. Just keep to the instructions you'll get, as you've been doing up until now."

Hao tried to linger a bit behind his CEO, Hanbin tried to get to talk to him. Two minutes, it was all they needed. Two minutes of looking at each other and assuring each other that it would be okay. Lee Ryutak all but ordered Hao to get into the car as soon as he reached the parking lot. *Please tell me you're free tonight*, Hao had texted three minutes later. Hanbin had felt the urge to smash his phone against the asphalt coating the parking lot where he was still waiting for Ji Ara's driver to arrive.

"Are you ready for tonight's gala with the investors?" Ara had said, immediately after. "Your group is the best we have to show them, I hope you're all proud of the success you've achieved this year. It was a long time due, with the talent you have."

Hanbin put on a smile, "We're all excited, *sajangnim*. We'll keep making you proud." He waited until her car had driven away, until he was sitting down behind his own wheel, to reply to Hao. *There's an investors gala*, he typed, *we're singing*. And then, because the knot on his stomach wasn't easing away, *Hao hyung this is unfair*. He didn't send it. How could he begin to explain what, exactly, felt unfair about this?

So there he was, still sitting in his car, still thinking that he should've been happy about this lunch. Still feeling completely gutted. He wanted to hide somewhere where no one could ask anything else of him, where he wouldn't be forced to agree to something he didn't feel like doing. And where he didn't have to talk, to explain himself, to find a justification for the ache that was shaking him to the bone.

"Jiwoong hyung sent me to check on you," Gunwook said, suddenly opening the passenger's door and sitting next to Hanbin. "Is everything alright?"

No. Hanbin thought, stupidly. *Nothing is*. "I'll be okay," he said. "Just give me five minutes."

“But, is something the matter?” Gunwook wasn’t easily fooled. He was smart, and he was kind, and Hanbin *loved* him because of it. Now, though, he wished Jiwoong had sent Taerae and his penchant for insults.

“Ji Ara told us we’re over,” he said, and he hated that his voice was rough and it felt like he’d been crying, when it wasn’t even the case, because he couldn’t even find the strength to cry. “Me and Hao, I mean. The promotional thing is over.”

Gunwook didn’t say anything, he got out of Hanbin’s car, walked around it. He opened Hanbin’s door and dragged him to his feet, almost prepotent. He was hugging him tight the next second, and Hanbin found that maybe he did have the strength to cry, because he did that for at least ten minutes straight. Gunwook kept not saying anything. He didn’t answer the phone when Jiwoong called him, just handed Hanbin a tissue and ran a hand through his hair to fix it a bit. “All cleaned up,” he said, then, with a big, gummy, smile. Hanbin laughed, then, because he knew this was what he had always said to Gunwook when he watched him get ready for school, years ago. He would straighten the lapels of his uniform jacket and ruffle his hair. And then he would say, *All cleaned up*, and send him off. His big baby, *their* big baby. And look at the man he’d become. Hanbin’s heart wasn’t made for going through all these emotions on the same day.

He started making mistakes. It began small. One missed step in choreography. They all told him he was just tired. Then timing got wrong in changes of formation. The instructor only thinned her mouth, she kept silent. He’d built himself a reputation as a perfect dancer, they were all patient with his mistakes. But they kept repeating and he kept thinking about them, so that, instead of avoiding them, he replicated them and extended them. He led the others to get things wrong, too. And their comeback date was getting closer, and he was losing his grasp of everything. He was a scam. He was a shadow of a good performer and if he’d only done well up until now it had been just luck. No real talent, no real technique. His vocals, too. They were nervous, he couldn’t get himself to relax. He couldn’t get himself to sleep. He was a mess. And everyone was paying the consequences.

“What’s wrong?” Jiwoong tried to face him.

“I don’t know,” Hanbin wasn’t lying. He didn’t know. He was tired, but he’d been more tired than this before and he’d still performed well. “Maybe I should stop for a while,” he said, barely louder than a whisper.

“I think you should talk to someone,” Jiwoong said. “We have a counselor at the company, do you want his number?”

Hanbin visited the counselor. Hanbin *loved* psychology, but this man wasn’t it. He tried to get him to talk about his dreams and how to achieve them and Hanbin only wanted to know how to sleep for eight hours without waking up in cold sweat and with every muscle on his body sore. Hanbin asked him for another doctor, whose number the counselor bitterly gave him. The new doctor didn’t have any free spots for the following three weeks. Hanbin elected to wait. He kept attending rehearsals, he kept messing things up in a way that was entirely unfamiliar to him. Everyone was worried and he hated himself for making them worry like this.

“I’ll get it right,” he promised himself out loud. “Everything that is wrong now, I’ll get it right.”

“Are you performing a spell?” Taerae walked in the practice room. He was wearing bright red pants and a tank top.

“I’m motivating myself,” Hanbin commented.

“I was on the phone with Hao hyung,” Taerae said, off-handedly. There was nothing off-handed in his face, though. “He said you haven’t been replying much, these days. Did the two of you fight?”

“No,” Hanbin sat down on the wooden floor, starting to stretch himself. “I just want to focus on practice.”

“Hanbin hyung,” Taerae sat down next to him. “You can’t focus on practice if your mind keeps going to how you’d rather be talking to Hao hyung. Just talk to him.”

Hanbin didn’t know why everyone thought they had the solution to all his problems in the palm of their hand. “And what would I tell him?”

Taerae took a breath. “Well, that’s for you to know, hyungie. But *talk* to him, really talk to him. Go beyond surface level, get that fucking Ji Ara out from your head. Think about the two of you.”

Hanbin grimaced. “I feel like I’m about to lose it all,” he confessed. “My talent, our fame, our fans. Him.”

Taerae smiled softly at him. “You won’t lose anything,” he said. “You’re just losing your mind a bit, but you’ll get it back.”

Dear Hanbin —

I'm Lim Sara, I'm from Jejudo. I knew you would be my favorite idol the first time I saw you dancing in a video I randomly found on Naver. You weren't really famous at the time, and my friends in school made fun of me because they all followed big names. I liked you, and I started paying more attention to you, and to your group, your wonderful group of wonderful people. You guys have changed my life, you've made it so much more interesting and so much brighter, just like the stars you borrow your name from you're able to shine through the night and make it easier to withstand.

My life wasn't easy. There was something, even then, that I didn't manage to understand, but it made my days horrible. It looked like everyone was living in a different dimension than me, and no matter how hard I tried to reach them, I was always a sort of alien. Everyone was happy, and I felt happy, too, just in a different way and because of different things, and it felt weird and almost wrong.

It's taken me three years, almost all the time I spent in high school, to understand that I'm a lesbian. And hey! It's not a bad thing, is it? I know you'll say it isn't, of course you'll say that. But when I was fifteen, and then sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, the weight of this word hung too heavy on my shoulders. I'm nineteen now, and I finished high school and I'm a university student, and I fought with myself for three months before I could gather the courage to ask a girl out. It didn't really work, she's dating a boyfriend now, and I'm here writing this letter to you, not to share my sadness, but to share that you're my pride, Hanbin. Literally. The pride I feel for myself as a gay woman, I owe it to you.

You and your genuine smile in all the interviews when people asked about your relationship with Hao oppa, you and your beautiful way of caring for each other (I know those photos weren't supposed to be taken, but everytime the papers printed secret shots of you I felt such a rush of pride for you, then it turned into pride for myself at a certain point), you and your vocal, open, support for your LGBTQ+ fans and for LGBTQ movies and media, all around.

I wasn't happy with the hard life had dealt to me, before. Now I look at myself in the mirror and I feel okay, I feel like my place in the world is here.

So I hope this letter will reach you, I hope your company gives you the letters your fans write to you, because I want you to know that you mean the world to me, Sung Han Bin. You are a beautiful soul and you're making the world a better place. I want you to know.

I love you, dearly.

Sara.

PS: If you ever travel to Jejudo, please visit my mother's guesthouse, she loves you too! She's a big fan of yours and she thinks that you're a sweet young man. She was the first to update me about you and Hao oppa, too. I think she knew you would mean that much to me.

Notes:

Huh.

You made it until here!!

So, next chapter will mark the final installment blah blah issue is I don't know how long it will take as I (surprisingly) landed a job!!! So, yay for the job, sad noises for everything else. Anyway. I'll do my best to be quick.

Anyway, i'm happy when you all talk to me both through comments and through the social media I linked on the previous chapter (I'm lazy rn, editing this to post was a lot, you can check them on the other page, pls), so, please: talk to me! Let me know whether the semi-insanity I'm going through got you to like its byproducts or not!!

Chapter 4 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/50821996/chapters/135841900>): **Part Four**

Summary:

The future starts looking good.

Notes:

I'm sorry for the time this took, I think I underestimated life!

Anyway, I don't know what to say. Thanks for being by my side through this journey, thanks for believing in me and for waiting patiently for me to write the next parts each time. Thanks for all the nice words you've had for me, I hope this "final" chapter won't disappoint you and ruin the whole perception of the story (ha ha ha i'm nervous).

(It's longer than the other three combined, but I gave up, if you want to lose sleep over this it's your life, you're all big kids).

(See the end of the chapter for [more notes \(#chapter_4_endnotes\)](#).)

Part IV

Hao wasn't going to panic. He refused to panic. He couldn't afford to panic. So he took a breath. And then another one. After the third one, he spoke into the phone as calmly as he could (not at all). "What the fuck do you mean Hanbin is *gone*?"

"Hyung," Matthew's voice was shaky. "He's not home," it was the third time he'd said it, Hao didn't need to hear it again. He needed new information, possibly containing the location where Hanbin currently was. Anything would work: the gym, a dance studio, his mother's bedroom in Cheonan, his high school's storage room or the capital city of Peru. "And his phone is turned off and I texted his mom and she said she wasn't going to speak to me now." Hao thought he heard a half sob.

"So she knows," Hao reasoned. Because he wasn't panicking. He was just ripping the skin away from one of his nail cuticles with the help of a different nail. "If his mom is fine, then he's fine, too." He said it out loud, because maybe if they said it out loud it would be true. Hanbin *was* fine. Full stop. But *where* the fuck was he? "Listen, maybe they've had an emergency at home," he tried to find some logic in this.

"He would tell us," Matthew countered. He sounded like he was fighting against tears.

"Stop," Hao said, softly. "You know that he's been stressed lately, he'll be sweating it off dancing or hiking or something. You know him." Hao wouldn't believe the words he was saying, if he heard them from another person. "Matthew, listen," he hung on to the last of his ability to stay calm and focused. "Let's trust him. He's not going to do anything weird. He wouldn't hurt you like that. He'll text us soon." He had no idea what Matthew replied. *If* Matthew replied. The call was disconnected and Hao was forcing back the tears in his eyes.

The thing was this. Hanbin wasn't faring well. Something had cracked within him and it was hard to keep all of him together. Poor kid that he was, he wasn't even dealing with it in the wrong way. He'd been to a therapist, and the doctor had listened to him, seriously, and she'd given him advice and a prescription for sleep aid, and another appointment for the following week. And Hanbin hadn't told Hao any of this, and Hao had had to learn it through Taerae who only knew because Hanbin had left his sleep medicine on the sink. And Hao got it, he didn't want people to worry for him either. But he fucking wished Hanbin would accept some support from him, too. It broke his heart. It was another testimony of how, at the end of the day, he had no right to *want* anything from Hanbin. *Fuck*. He wanted to help him, he wanted him to do better, to feel better. And it didn't suit him in the slightest to just stand to the side and watch as Hanbin suffered. There was also a terrible thought that was making its way inside of Hao, more insistent with each passing day: what if, partially, it was his fault, too? What if he was somewhat responsible for it? But how could he voice that? How could he go and tell him: hey, love of my life, I know you're hurting but please reassure me, too, let's make this about me, too.

Tae Rae

> *Hyung*

> *i'll copy you what hanbin hyung wrote*

> *he's fine, first of all.*

>> *from: SungHan*

Please forgive me for making you worry. I didn't think this through very well. I'm fine. I'm okay. I need to be on

my own for a while. I'm sorry, again, if I ran away without notice. I didn't want to scare you, I realize now how it might have made you think I wouldn't be OK. However, I'm good. I need time by myself, I've told the company. I won't be coming back for a few days. But I'll be back, asap. Please don't worry about me, think of this as Hanbin that is healing and recovering in a quieter place. I have to find my balance back. I can't keep letting you down daily, and I owe it to you to come back as the best version of me. So I'll do that. And, again, don't worry, please. I love you all, my best friends in the whole world. I'll hug you extra tight when I'm back home. I'll bring food. Wait for me happily.

> *Jesus the way I hate him.*

janghao

> *this won't do*

> *he's so fucking not okay.*

Tae Rae

> *i know*

> *but my hands are tied*

> *like, realistically, what do we do?*

janghao

> *godd*

> *taerae*

>> *from: Bin <3*

hao, i'm sure you already know. hao, i know it's a lot to ask. if you can

>> *from: Bin <3*

[location attached]

>> *from: Bin <3*

could you not bring anyone else along?

> *i need to get there tae*

Tae Rae

> *fuck him.*

> *i'll drive you.*

Taerae was silent on his side, driving quietly through the late afternoon traffic, out of the city and towards the coast, where Hanbin's address indicated. *His family has a beach house*, Matthew had supplied when they'd met up in the underground parking space of their building. He hadn't joined them, saying that if Hanbin didn't want to see anyone it was only fair to respect his wishes. Hao had felt bad. Hanbin had asked for him, *only* him. Maybe Matthew would have liked to be the one who got to see him first. *I wasn't a good enough friend*, he said, though. *To him and to you, too. I'm sorry.* Hao didn't have the energy to question it now, he just hugged him quickly and joined Taerae in his car. "Tell them whatever you want," Hao was saying, as he spoke on the phone with his manager Yunho. "I don't care, I won't be attending practice tonight, and I won't be there tomorrow, either."

"You have a group schedule tomorrow, I can't just let you disappear—" Yunho didn't sound angry, he sounded confused. Because this had never happened before, Hao had always had perfect attendance, and he wasn't the kind of person who just stepped back from any scheduled activity on a whim.

"I won't be there," Hao said, and he ran a hand down his face. "I need to be elsewhere, and it's an emergency and I can't be there. You can tell the management, *I don't care*. Tell them the truth, tell them I went off without permission, tell them I'm dying with diarrhea I don't care. Just tell them I'm not coming back tomorrow." Taerae took a turn, following the directions on Naver maps, open on his phone. It said they would be there in twelve minutes.

"Hao-yah," Yunho sighed. "I've known you since you entered this company," Hao knew that. He'd always, *always* been there. "I know this must be important, if you're ditching your schedule like this. So, please, be honest. What's going on?"

Hao looked at Taerae, sitting quietly and wearing a serious expression, his mouth thinned in worry. “Hyung,” he said to Yunho. “I told you, it’s an emergency. I wasn’t lying. A person I care about needs me with them. And I have to do this. I-”

“Is it Hanbin-ssi?” Yunho didn’t ask it in a judgy way. He just wanted confirmation. Hao gave it. “Okay,” Yunho took another deep breath. “Okay. Don’t get caught, Hao. Don’t let anyone take any picture, don’t let anyone know where you are. I’ll tell them you’re running a fever, I’ll tell them I’ve checked on you and I’ll be checking on you. I’m putting myself out there for you, okay?”

“Thank *you*,” Hao breathed out, a bit too shakily. “I owe you a big one,” he added.

“Just be smart,” Yunho said. “And we’ll call it even.”

Taerae waited for the front gate to the apartment complex to unlock in front of Hao, then he drove away with just a nod of his head. *If you can*, he’d said to Hao, *will you tell us how he is?* Of course, Hao had assured him. Now, though, he had to cross a small courtyard, populated with a few cars, and it felt like an insurmountable distance. Hao had never been to this place, it was a small coastal town of the kind that attracts tourism at the peak of summer and stray visitors whenever the weather’s nice. Now, in early September, there were still a few people enjoying the drags of summer. Not Hao. Hao’s hands were freezing as he walked towards the single flight of stairs leading to the door labeled as number 5. Whatever would be waiting for him behind that door, whichever version of Hanbin, however broken, however in need he would find, he would give all of himself to him. He knocked.

Hanbin’s face was pale, but he looked well enough, and he was *okay*, and he was in front of Hao, and the first thing Hao did was to slap him on his upper arm, hard. “You ass,” he said, and then he stepped in, closed the door behind his own shoulders and threw his arms around Hanbin. “Making me drive all this way,” he muttered against Hanbin’s thin T-shirt, against him, against his frame that was so incredibly real. Hanbin shuddered in his arms, with such a stark sob that it shook Hao, too. Hao stroked the back of his head, the upper part of his back, again and again. “It’s okay,” he said. “Everything’s fine.”

“I’m so stupid,” Hanbin’s muffled whimper made Hao break into the first smile of the last few hours.

“You’re so not stupid,” he replied. He stroked his hair again. He kept doing that. “This place looks nice,” Hao went with a diversion strategy. “Do you come here often?”

Hanbin’s sob felt a bit like laughter too. And Hao felt like he’d won a gold medal at the Olympics, but he was just standing in a small living room, whose walls were lined up with framed photos of seaside landscapes and whose furniture was essential and a bit dusty like vacation homes often are. He was standing in the blandest living room ever and he was holding Hanbin, who was clinging to him like his whole life depended on it, and Hao just hugged him tighter. “I come here whenever I can,” Hanbin disentangled himself a bit. His eyes were red, now, and his face blotched and Hao was so fucking glad to see a hint of a smile on his lips that he couldn’t stop the tears coming out from his own eyes. “I don’t usually come here to cry, though,” Hanbin added, and Hao hit him again.

Hao felt like things were weirdly back to normal. In the way you know that things are really *not* normal, but you don’t know how to bring up the real questions. Hanbin pulled out two packets of instant ramyeon and set the water to boil on the stove. He also brought out two sets of chopsticks, two glasses, a big bottle of mineral water and a bottle of tomato sauce. He set all of this on an extra-low foldable table, now standing in front of the couch.

“Hanbin-ah,” Hao was sitting down on the small couch in the living room. “I love that you’re making us dinner, but I can’t do this,” it didn’t cost him any real effort to say this. He needed to. “Why the fuck are we here? You can’t just get up and leave the city without telling anyone like this. What happened?”

Hanbin turned to him. His eyes were big and it almost looked like he was ready to cry again. Hao patted the cushion next to him. Hanbin sat down, rigidly. Hao sighed and took his hand. “I’m going crazy, hyung,” he said. “I’m losing all my sanity and it’s all my fault, because I can’t face things like the adult I’m supposed to be. And I tried not to let it impact anyone else’s life but look at the mess I’ve made.”

“What mess, Bin-ah?” Hao watched him close his eyes, pressing them shut with strength. He was trying not to cry. Hao, too, was trying not to. It wasn’t easy, with the way Hanbin’s pain was evident and manifest.

“Everything,” he said, stubborn. “I messed everything up in practice yesterday too. The choreographer yelled at me for twenty minutes and I couldn’t even look her in the eyes. I’m fucking our team up, too, because how can I face them when I’m like that and keep ruining everything and, you know what’s worse? If I could sleep, everything would go back to normal in no time. I’d be better at dancing, I wouldn’t be an awful friend and a nightmare to talk to, and they

wouldn't hate me and I wouldn't have to hate myself for letting them down. And I wouldn't have to drag you into this because I can't seem to fucking function if you-" he stopped. Hao wanted him to finish that damned sentence.

"Oh, my baby," he said, instead. "The boys don't hate you," was the first thing he followed up with.

"I've been fighting with Matt a lot," Hanbin said. "Not about how I suck at my job, though," he explained. Or, well, he didn't, because he went on with, "Not that we've really been fighting, either. He just throws accusations at me and I don't pick it up, and then it eats me up from the inside. He keeps suggesting I do things I don't wanna do and then I lose sleep over that."

"Matthew's the one that called me to be reassured that you were fine, though," Hao said, barely over a whisper. "He cares so much about you, maybe you just need to be more honest with him."

Hanbin took a breath that was broken and wet. Hao leaned his head on his shoulder. "I know," Hanbin said. "But I was terrified that he would be right," he admitted. "I *am* terrified that he'll be right."

The water was boiling, its low rumble well audible from the kitchen. Hao let go of Hanbin with a delicate brush against him. "You were right," he said. "We should eat first, talk about all this later."

Hanbin didn't know where to start. The way he saw it, the way it was for him, his whole head was a tangle of thoughts and fears he couldn't begin to pick at. Hao, the group, his family, his fans, these were all the people who would inevitably find fault in him. And soon, too. And Hanbin wasn't going to be able to handle all that disappointment, all at once.

"Hey," Hao re-emerged from the bathroom, he'd shed a few accessories since he'd come, and was now only down to his t-shirt and shorts. His bare feet stopped in front of Hanbin, who was looking down, now. "So, I was thinking, as I washed my hands, that it's highly improbable, not to say impossible, that you'll lose all your talent as a dancer in the span of twenty days. I'm not saying this to cheer you up, I'm talking from a scientific standpoint. Like, unless you're suffering from a big injury that'll limit your physical abilities, there's no way you're going to stop being the best dancer I know overnight." Hanbin peeked up at him. Hao's eyes were the warmest shade of brown, but he was also frowning and Hanbin would give everything he had to be able to stop making him worry like that. "So, if your choreographer is a bitch and thinks you're talentless it's her problem, not yours. And if she lacks the human decency to empathize with someone who's going through a lot, you're not to blame, she is."

Hanbin followed Hao's movements as he sat back on the couch, next to him. It had been too long since they'd both been in the same space like this, but it was too sad that this had to be the occasion that brought them back together. "But I'm not really going through a lot, am I?" He said. "There's nothing in my life that really warrants the state I'm in. It's all in my head, and I shouldn't let this affect me this much, but I'm worried that now that I've seen these cracks, everyone else will see them and-"

"And what?" Hao's tone was resolute. "What if your family sees that you can be weak, too? What if your instructors at the company see that you're a bit less perfect, some days? What if Jiwoong or Matthew or Taerae or Gunwook see you angry or disappointed or vulnerable? Do you have to be perfect a hundred percent of the time, Hanbin-ah?"

Hanbin felt tears well up in his eyes again. He was a crying machine lately. "I've been attempting perfection all my life," he managed to say before one tear escaped. "And I tried to tell people that I couldn't promise them this perfection. But everyone, *everyone*, wanted that. Perfect grades in school, and in uni too, flawless performances on stage, the fucking perfect love story with you, too." He wiped away the tears on his cheek, angrily. "Hanbin the perfect dancer, the perfect student, the perfect son, the perfect brother, the perfect boyfriend. And I can't even be myself, in all of this, because if I say the things I want, if I do the things I want, then it all falls apart."

Hao's hands were cold. The one that took hold of his joined hands resting on top of Hanbin's legs was cold. And the one that gently ran a thumb under his eyes to wipe them dry was cold too. It came as a bit of a shock. "You can't be perfect, Hanbin," he said. "No one of us can," so why did people want it from him? "But people only see what they want to see, and you can trick them into believing you're perfect. Or you can let them know that you're human. Maybe you're not a perfect human being," Hao was staring directly into his eyes and Hanbin wanted to get away. Again. Maybe he should have run further. "But I think you're a wonderful human being, Bin-ah. I like the person you are." Hanbin retracted a bit, away from his touch. "So, what are the things you want to say?"

Hanbin took a breath. "If I say them," he said. "Maybe they'll be right. Ji Ara-nim, Matthew, too. They'll be right about me, and about this. And about the fact that, in the end, we're all just doing our jobs and it's my fault for deluding

myself into thinking that people would understand.” Maybe he wasn’t making any sense. It was hard to put words together. “If I’m too honest, people will leave.”

Hao took his hands again, he squeezed them so hard that Hanbin felt a sting of pain. “I’m not leaving,” Hao said. “So tell me.”

“You’re here because I basically guilt tripped you into being here, which is even more awful-”

“I’m here because I want to be here,” Hao interrupted him. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere else. And I’m not leaving.”

Hanbin looked at the tangle of their hands, at the strong press of Hao’s palms against his fingers. “Why did we end up being hurt by this stupid lie?”

Hao’s eyes were big and honest and full of the rawest form of emotion, when he replied. “Which lie?”

“You and I,” Hanbin said, and his chest hurt. And everything else hurt, too. “Our relationship. It was our job, and we did it. We did it perfectly, too. And now they told us to wrap this up and I’m-” he stopped. “Lost. Hurt. Angry? Yeah. Is it okay for them to use us like this and then toss it all away? Are we not worth anything? Are the things we lived through in these months worthless?”

“Are they worthless to you?” Hao sounded scared, too, now. “Hanbin, nothing will make me change my mind about you. Ji Ara and Lee Gyutak might want me to ignore you, but that won’t happen. Everyone might be disappointed about you for *any reason* and I still won’t believe them. This thing, the thing between you and me,” and what was it? Hanbin’s head would explode. “This thing is not disappearing. I’m not disappearing, either.”

“But it was all a lie,” Hanbin’s voice came out as barely a whisper. Hao held his gaze, and he let go of his hands and he brushed his hair away from Hanbin’s forehead.

Hao sighed, softly. Something shifted in the set of his eyes, and he closed them for a second. “No,” he said. “It wasn’t *all* a lie.” Hanbin raised his eyebrows, surprised. “I wanted to see you for real, most of the time, I never said I was happy when I wasn’t, I never lied when I thanked you and, honestly, Hanbin. You don’t believe it was all a lie, either.”

Hanbin tangled his own hand with Hao’s, this time. “That’s the scary part,” he finally admitted. “That neither of us thought it was a lie. But the people who matter do, and they’re breaking us up right when I-”

“No,” Hao said again. “They’re breaking *it* up. Not us. We’re being freed, baobei,” Hanbin felt his head spin. “Hanbin, I’ve said it two thousand times. I’m not going anywhere. I’m not leaving you, not because you’re asking me to. Because I don’t want to go. I don’t want to leave you.” He was saying things that didn’t make sense to Hanbin. “Hell, I’ve been waiting for this to be over so I could finally tell you that-” he looked at Hanbin again. “Hanbin. Sung Hanbin. Let me be with you a while longer.”

Hanbin was freezing, he was exploding with how hot he felt. He was going to jump and he wasn’t ever going to move again. “Hyung,” he said. “Hyung, if you’re not careful I’ll keep you forever,” he was crying again and this time he wouldn’t even try to hold it back.

“I sincerely hope you do,” Hao said. And, once again, he moved Hanbin’s hair from his forehead. Only, this time he planted a loud kiss on it. And another one, longer, warmer. Hanbin hugged his waist, melting into him. Hao was cradling his head and he was resting his chin on top of it, and Hanbin felt like this right here, this one, this was his place. Hao was.

hanbinsung

- > *first of all i’m really sorry about how i dealt with everything*
- > *i think i’ll be back home tomorrow evening*
- > *if you have time, we can talk a bit*
- > *anyway, now i’m with hao hyung. i’m not done talking to him either, tbh*
- > *got a lot of talking to do huh*
- > *we had dinner; so don’t worry about that.*
- > *i think i might sleep better tonight but that’ll be tested soon, i guess?*
- > *idk, i’m just sorry about everything*

matchoo

> *stop saying you're sorry*
> *ok for tomorrow night*
> *glad to hear about dinner, you're incredibly stubborn about things so i'm glad you managed to keep yourself human, at least.*
> *i knew hao hyung was coming, i hope you manage to set things straight between the two of you.*
> *fr tho, i was never a hater of your relationship. i just want you to be happy, bin hyung.*

hanbinsung

> *i know*
> *ttyl*

matchoo

> *sure!*
> *good night!*

mother taeraesa

> *hyung.*
> *don't let him come back to seoul without making him say how he feels for you.*
> *it's the only thing i ask of you*

haomg

> *working on that*
> *this place is pretty tho??*

mother taeraesa

> *ok? did i ask?*
> *and don't be on your phone with me, you have more important things to do.*

haomg

> *chill dude*
> *hanbin's texting too*

mother taeraesa

> *yeah, he texted matthew*
> *okay now put your phones away and go do something else*

haomg

> *fine.*
> *good night.*

> *what if i don't sleep either, tho?*

mother taeraesa

> *plenty of fun activities to do in bed if you're not sleeping and you're with hanbin hyung*

haomg

> *never going to ask you anything ever again*

Hanbin couldn't remember the last time he'd slept longer than three hours in a row. So, when he woke up and the

sun was already filtering through the curtains they hadn't properly pulled close, he was surprised. Maybe he'd reached a point of exhaustion that had allowed him to sleep through the whole night. Maybe crying for two hours straight had granted him this. That, or it had been the fact that Hao was there, still asleep, in the bed Hanbin used to spend his summer vacations in when he was a middle school student. Hao, who'd promised he wouldn't leave. Hao, who'd stayed and who was staying and who was the most beautiful person Hanbin had ever known, inside and out. Hao, whom Hanbin loved, after all. Hao, who, probably, likely, loved him back.

"Good morning," Hao groaned, and he turned his back to Hanbin, rolling on his other side. There were plenty of places where Hao could've slept, yet he'd elected to share Hanbin's bed. It wasn't large enough for two adult men, but there they were. Hao turned again, to face him. It took him a lot of shuffling and shifting, because Hanbin's own knees were in the way and the sheets were everywhere and they'd stolen one pillow from Areum's bed and it didn't fit and this was just a testimony to their shared stubbornness. "You slept, didn't you?"

"I did," Hanbin was still lying against his pillow, his cheek pressing into it, while he kept staring at Hao's messy hair and at his slightly puffy face, a little sleep-swollen. "Hao, I need to talk to you." Hao just looked back at him, and the calm certainty in his gaze set something ablaze inside of Hanbin. He took a shallow breath. "It will sound stupid," he started. "But I think that you deserve to know. I've tried to talk myself out of the feelings I have for you for months, now. To the point that I forcibly stopped myself from thinking about any of this for more than two seconds at a time. We would go somewhere together and I would lie to myself that I was just doing a great job at pretending to be in love with you. Hao," he swallowed down the knot of anxiety lumped in his throat. "Hao, I'm so sorry for the way I tried to hide it all in the back of my mind, I did you wrong. And if I could, if I had the chance, I would go back in time to tell our bosses to fuck themselves and to just let us be on our own, because I do believe we're meant to be but this made it all so complicated and so painful. And I-

"You can still tell them," Hao cut him off, and there was a smile on his lips and Hanbin wanted to kiss him so bad, because he'd spent four months of his life denying that he wanted to and now it was too much for him to bear. "We can still tell them."

Hanbin felt like he was young, a small and insignificant element in a big world, when he said: "You'd refuse to sign up on the break-up notice?" It came out as a tiny whisper, and yet Hanbin's heart was pounding in his ears and was maybe louder than his voice. Hao's smile brightened and Hanbin didn't even let him answer his own question. "Let's date," he said. "Without the faking. Without the media. Date me, Hao-ge. I like you," it was messy and his cheeks were probably as red as tomatoes, "maybe I should have started with that. I like you, though. A lot."

"Stop," Hao laughed. And he pressed a hand against his mouth. "Oh, Hanbin," his eyes were shiny and his laughter wasn't subsiding. "Yes," he said. Hanbin brought his own hand over Hao's, moved it away from his mouth but not away from his face. "I'd promised myself I would wait until our dating stunt was over to tell you, but- Bin-ah, I think my faking stopped after the first twenty days, maybe." What? Hao had liked him since that early after meeting him? "I couldn't wait to tell you, Hanbin. Of course we'll date. And I won't agree to any more stupid shit coming from those assholes." He moved his thumb along Hanbin's cheek, delicately. "I'm so happy when I'm with you," his voice was quiet. "I've been so happy since I met you."

Hanbin dared to slip his hand around Hao's waist. Hao shifted even closer, their knees were pressed together and Hao's face was incredibly close to his. Hanbin was the one who moved to bring their lips together. Hao's lips were a bit dry but he kissed Hanbin back and it was more than Hanbin had ever hoped for. Hao's hand fell on the back of Hanbin's neck and it stayed there, tangling in his hair, reaching the soft skin behind the shell of his ear. It was one kiss after the other, each one short and breathless and then Hao held longer onto one and didn't break them apart for as long as he managed to and he didn't know it, but he flipped something inside of Hanbin, because he pressed into the next kiss with a strength he didn't know he had. Hao's lips parted wider, and Hanbin just went along with him, deepening it, making both of them breathless with it, and Hao gasped and he pulled away from Hanbin just enough to catch some air. Hanbin tried to decipher his expression, he tried to devise if he'd been getting anything wrong. Hao's hands, though, reached around his back, and he was pulling Hanbin half on top of himself, Hanbin held himself back.

"Hao," he whispered. He needed to make sure they were on the same page. He needed to know what Hao wanted. Hao didn't dignify him with a verbal answer, he just gave up on getting Hanbin to move and, instead, pushed him to lie on his back. He was kissing him again the next second, and he was also getting his legs on either side of Hanbin's hips, getting to sit on his thighs. Hao was still kissing him breathless, but he was also guiding his hands to hold his waist and Hanbin had never done this, he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing but he found himself struggling to get to a sitting position and, when he managed to, he adjusted Hao's weight on top of him and Hao's sigh against his mouth

seemed to indicate that he wasn't doing that bad, after all. He slipped his hands under Hao's T-shirt, and Hao broke the kiss with another gasp. Hanbin trailed his mouth against his jaw, and he felt Hao's breathing get faster and more shallow and he was letting his head fall back and Hanbin just kissed his neck, his throat, everywhere he could because this was amazing and Hao clearly liked it and the skin under Hanbin's hands was burning up and he couldn't get enough. Hao took his head in his hands, stilled him and went back to kissing him properly, mouth on mouth. Only, this time, it was different, with the way they were sliding their lips together in a symphony of wet sounds and thin breaths, and Hao was driving him insane because Hanbin had never wanted anyone like this, and he would never get enough of Hao's scorching touch and of the eager way he was plastering himself against Hanbin's whole body. He'd suppressed his desire for so long that he just kept on licking into Hao's mouth, kissing him, raking his hands along his narrow waist and strong back. Hao's mouth moved to his neck and Hanbin lost it. He heard himself make a sound that came from the back of his throat, animal-like, whiny and needy and Hao shuddered a bit in his arms and he didn't stop kissing and biting at his skin. It hit Hanbin all of a sudden, how hard he was, and how Hao's own hard-on was pressing against his abdomen. Hanbin gasped when Hao's lips touched his neck again, fresh with this knowledge. He'd never thought about what would happen, honestly. Yes, he would kiss Hao. Yes, they would be dating-

"Hey," Hao had noticed that he was thinking too hard about something. "Too much?" No. If anything, not enough. "Should we slow it down?" Hanbin chased after his mouth. "Hold on," Hao smiled. "Answer me, baby."

Hanbin didn't think he had enough synapses to spare to form a whole sentence. "It's good," he managed. Hao raised one eyebrow. How was he so rational in this situation? Hanbin kept moving his hands underneath his shirt. Hao's eyes fluttered close. Better. Hanbin slid one of his hands out and cupped his face. Hao let out the smallest sigh. "What do you want, hyung?"

Hao's eyes snapped open. He looked at Hanbin for two long seconds. "Just kissing is fine," he couldn't mean it.

"You can ask for more," Hanbin wanted more. He didn't know what, but he did. More of Hao, more of his touch, of his hands on him, everything. But more.

"*Fuck*," Hao cursed softly. "You're not real," he said. "I must have made you up." Hanbin laughed. And Hao laughed too and all the nervousness Hanbin had accumulated, all his doubts, faded away at once. This made something shift. Hao was smiling, amused, when he took Hanbin's hand and laced their fingers together. "Okay," he said. He kissed Hanbin's hand. "Just kissing isn't fine," he admitted. "I want to get you out of that damn shirt and I want to touch you, and I need you to touch me, too."

Hanbin was bright red as he executed his wishes, but they were both giggling and it was fine. It was wonderful. Hanbin wouldn't have it any other way. Hao spread his hands, both of them, on Hanbin's chest, his expression somewhere between admiring and hypnotized. His left thumb stroked lightly on Hanbin's muscle, and it was a bit too electric. Hao was staring at the space between Hanbin's collarbones and he ran delicate fingers on the tattoo etched there. Hanbin swallowed his own spit, feeling a bit too observed. "Hey," he said. "You're making me shy."

Hao's eyes were round and he was still smiling but there was also something else in his gaze, something that made Hanbin feel like he was only waiting for Hao to snap. But Hao sunk his face against Hanbin's neck and shoulder and he hugged him tight. He kissed his skin there and he whispered something unintelligible. "What?" Hanbin laughed. Hao's skin was hot against his, and the beautiful muscles on his back were flexing underneath Hanbin's hands.

"I said I never wanna go back home," Hao said, a bit louder. Hanbin ran a hand along his spine. Down, then up, down again. When Hao let go of him, it was only to kiss him.

Hao guided him to lay down, and his kisses covered all of Hanbin's skin. His shoulders, his arms, his chest, his stomach. Hao was everywhere, either with his lips or his hands, and Hanbin was powerless in his hands. It felt like being worshiped, it felt like being loved. Hao didn't leave a single square centimeter of him untouched, he made sure Hanbin couldn't even doubt that Hao wanted this as much as he did. Hanbin flipped them over, and then it was him, sitting between Hao's legs, and running his own mouth against Hao's body. Hao wasn't quiet, not for a second. When Hanbin kissed his navel, he let out a deep moan that turned into a breathless laugh. He sobbed, when Hanbin went back up to kiss his chest, and he cursed, over and over, when Hanbin let his mouth linger on his nipple. It would be easy, Hanbin thought, to learn what would make him feel the best. It would be easy to get to understand all of Hao like this, too. Hao stopped his hand when it reached the elastic band of his shorts. "You don't have to," his voice was broken. Hanbin pulled his shorts down. Hao let his head fall back onto the pillow. His boxers were already sporting a wet patch on the front, Hanbin imagined he was in the same situation. He ran a hesitant hand over Hao's bulge. Hao whimpered, and his hips almost bucked forward. Hanbin's life was full of blessings, apparently, because how was Hao this perfect? "Hanbin, either you touch me or I'll *die*."

The angle wasn't the best, Hanbin realized it soon. His wrist was straining and he couldn't quite pick a pace, but Hao was panting, and he kept pumping the best he could, even if it was really not the best at all. "Next time," Hanbin found himself saying, "we're getting lube. This isn't as nice as it should be."

Hao groaned. "I don't give a fuck," he said. Hanbin let his thumb go over his tip again. Hao whined. "I'll go to a pharmacy later," Hao added, incoherently. "I'll buy condoms too," Hanbin stroked him again. Down. Up. Tighter and with his palm pressing a bit more into it. "*Christ*," Hao's hands thrashed uselessly on the sheet. Was he this worked up from the worst handjob of his life? God, he must be really sensitive. Hao came with a loud groan and a hand pressed against his own mouth. Hanbin took it away and kissed him, trying to keep his hand on his cock at the same time. It was a test of coordination he wasn't sure he was successful at. Hao's breathing became more regular after a couple minutes. There was a determined set to his eyes when he said: "My turn, now."

Hanbin didn't last any dignified amount of time. Hao's hand wrapped around him and he didn't have to do anything complex, anything articulated. Hanbin lost track of everything. Hao was touching him. Hao was whispering words of appreciation, Hao was calling him beautiful and amazing and he was also kissing his shoulders and his neck and his fingers were pulling at him in all the right ways and Hanbin had been hard forever or so it felt. Hao tugged, and he tugged and Hanbin's breath stopped in his throat at the way he came. Hard and white and searing and he went a bit weightless under Hao's ministrations. Hao kissed him again. Hanbin's hands found his waist again, like they were made to be there. The kiss turned hot and then it slowed down as they both realized how tiring it all had been. Not just the longest first hour of the morning, but their past five months together.

"I was serious," Hao said, coming back from the bathroom, his hair wet and some red marks on his chest where Hanbin had kissed him a bit too hard. "I will go buy that stuff at the pharmacy, tell me where the nearest one is."

Hanbin felt his face burn. Why was he this shameless? "Hyung, I-" They still had to eat breakfast. Hanbin still had to process that he and Hao were a real thing now. "There's a sort of convenience store," he ended up saying. "It should have everything."

Hao walked closer to him. He stopped right in front of Hanbin, sitting on the couch. "I won't do anything you don't want me to," he said. "I just want to be prepared." Hanbin pulled him to sit on his legs again. Hao let out a bright laugh.

"Have you ever done it before?" Hanbin wasn't jealous nor bitter. He was curious.

Hao took a breath. "Not all the way, no," he replied. "I never had a real relationship until you," Hanbin felt his face grow hotter. *Until you*. "And I'm not a fan of sex without love," Hao concluded.

"Sweet talker," Hanbin joked. It was easier to deflect, rather than giving Hao's words all the weight they actually carried.

"Yah, it's true!" Hao protested. "I'm being honest, I'm telling you the truth!" Hanbin laughed at his fake hurt expression. "You don't take me seriously! Oh, my lover is the worst." Hanbin only laughed harder.

"I'm hungry," he said, and he left a kiss on Hao's cheek. "Let's make breakfast, let's also pick lunch," Hao's smile was quiet, and fond. "Hyung, I'll go buy you your favorite breakfast. You should stay in, so your manager won't get uselessly worried about you." Hao disentangled himself and sat on the couch.

"Fine," he relented. "I'll wait here and let you spoil me. Not complaining," Hanbin laughed again. He gathered his phone and put on his shoes.

"Ah, hyung," he remembered he hadn't told him something relevant, in all this. "I forgot, earlier. You know what should have made me understand how I felt for you but I was dumb and didn't think much about it?" Hao looked aggravated. Hanbin knew he looked embarrassed enough, though, as he went on. "I never told my family we were faking it."

He was already out of the door, but he still heard Hao reply: "What do you mean?" and "Hanbin, for God's sake," and "Oh my god, he's an idiot."

canadian oppa

> *i'm bored*

mother taeraesa

> *so what*

canadian oppa

> *idk you're in the other room come entertain me*

mother taeraesa

> *ever thought that maybe i was doing something?*

canadian oppa

> *baby you answered in 0.5 seconds*

> *you're NOT doing anything*

mother taeraesa

> *i don't feel like getting up from this couch*

> *where's your bf, why isn't he there to entertain you*

canadian oppa

> *we have the day off because he's filming that thing yo*

> *pay attention!*

> *why are you laughing??? i can hear you!*

mother taeraesa

> *because gunwook made the best face at his history assignment*

canadian oppa

> *okay you're babysitting him?*

> *wanna play a game??*

mother taeraesa

> *as long as i don't have to get up*

canadian oppa

> *yep*

> *okay tell me: what do you think the hyungs are doing at hanbin's house*

mother taeraesa

> *.....*

> *no.*

canadian oppa

> *come onnnnn*

> *like: who cried at the love confession? who actually confessed first? do you think they're like boyfriends, now? like, right now????*

mother taeraesa

> *dude.*

canadian oppa

> *pleasee*

> *it's like making up a silly little story*

mother taeraesa

> *fine*

> *i think hanbin hyung cried, hao hyung probably kept it in and will cry like a week from now just to end up*

calling him in the middle of our schedules to tell him something disgusting

- > then of course hanbin will have talked three hours just to tell hao he likes him*
- > i HOPE they're boyfriends or i'll kill them*

canadian oppa

- > okay, i disagree with everything.*
- > they both cried in my opinion, it was a tearful confession and it was hao hyung who told hanbin he's in love with him, only because hanbin hyung would be too stunned to see him get there and then they'll probably only start calling each other their boyfriend on the way back*

mother taeraesa

- > i'm just wondering*
- > will you check who was right when he's back?*

canadian oppa

- > well sure*
- > i'll have him tell everything*

mother taeraesa

- > please not everything*

canadian oppa

- > wdyam*

mother taeraesa

- > how are you not getting ittt*
- > baby boy, i don't want to know what they did ok*
- > just general notions about the state of their relationship*

canadian oppa

- > :O*
- > well, i mean, if he's sharing i'm listening.*

mother taeraesa

- > but i'm not!*
- > and we all sleep in the same room*
- > please spare me*

Hanbin was yawning with an endearing frequency. Hao got up from his seat in the extra cramped kitchenette and all but tore the dishcloth from his hands. "You have a lot of sleep to catch up on," he said. "I'll finish up here, go to bed," he tried to push Hanbin away from the sink. He half failed, because Hanbin was stronger than him. But he did take a step back, and it allowed Hao to place himself between him and the sink. He picked up rinsing the bowls Hanbin had already scrubbed clean. Hanbin didn't say anything, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, he just hugged Hao from the back and rested his head against his shoulder. Hao's heart swelled. This was it, huh? The life he'd always wanted for the two of them. He felt his eyes burn a bit. "Hanbin, I mean it, go to bed," he repeated, because he really didn't want to cry in front of him right now.

"But it's two in the afternoon," Hanbin said, and it didn't make sense, because people can hit their bed whenever they want to. He yawned again. Hao laughed and he pulled at Hanbin's joined hands around his waist, unlacing them. "Okay, I'll go," Hanbin relented. "But promise you'll wake me up in an hour max."

"We'll see," Hao said, and he wiped one of the bowls dry.

"Hyung," Hanbin pleaded. "I don't want to sleep all day," he said. "It's like the only day we have in forever, and

who knows when we'll get to have time like this again." Hao closed his eyes a bit. Why did Hanbin always have to say things? Why couldn't he just think of them?

"Sleep," he ordered, and Hanbin actually let him go. "There's a lot of time until we have to be back," he lied. There wasn't. There *never* was enough time for them. But Hao refused to be defeated by this. They would find a way. They would make it work. They would make time, they would find time that wasn't there only to be together.

Hao roamed alone through the — small — house, leaving Hanbin undisturbed in his hard-earned slumber. Vacation homes are interesting, they always are, with the amount of stuff that gets left there across the span of a lot of years. The kitchen still featured kids plates, complete with Disney characters prints, while the thin bookcase in the living room had a wide array of paperbacks from the early 2000s and a collection of creased comic books. Hao picked one up, sitting cross-legged on the couch. It wasn't an exciting read, not by any standards, but it was nice to think about Hanbin's family passing it from one to the other, his parents huddled over their children, guiding them through the words they didn't yet recognize. It was easy to imagine how Hanbin and his sister would have complained about it being the other's favorite read, and not their own. It was easy to imagine it being read over and over again every summer, because this was what was here and they might not have anything newer in their own bags. He wondered which of the items he still hadn't bought would meet the same destiny. Which magazine or paperback novel would be leafed through an inordinate amount of time by him and the people he loved? Which T-shirt, once new and bright, would become the most well-worn, the one that might be relocated into a beach house to be worn "as an emergency" so that he would have an excuse not to throw it away? He put the comic book back in its place, and he opened the door to the bedroom just by a tiny sliver. Hanbin was sleeping and Hao found himself praying that it would be a paperback they would buy together, the one that they would read over and over, and that they would leave somewhere with the idea that, yeah, they should keep it. He prayed that there would be many of those items that they would remember how, and when, and why they'd bought in the first place. Those which cluttered houses and which people only kept because they were so permeated by memories of a life built together that they couldn't bear the idea of living without them.

He walked into the room. Sitting on the mattress, he brushed Hanbin's dark hair away from his eyebrows. Hanbin's beauty would never stop leaving him speechless. The smooth lines of his face, the softness of his skin. But seeing him asleep was never going to be on par with seeing him awake, with the way his face was always bright and animated.

"Hanbin-ah," he called him. He combed his hair back again and again. "You wanted me to wake you up, baby," he said, keeping his voice steady, but not too low. "You can keep sleeping, though. I don't mind it." Hanbin stirred lightly. "I know you're tired. And I know I promised Yunho hyung I wouldn't let anyone see me, but wouldn't it be amazing to go to the beach? Let's come here again when we're not running away from our jobs, like, actively." Hanbin's eyes opened, slowly. He took Hao in, with slow blinks. Hao knew he'd struck gold with this boy. The way his heart was reacting to seeing Hanbin wake up was insane. Medically concerning, too. Hanbin moved a bit on the mattress so that he would be able to hug Hao loosely, all sideways.

"Thanks for waking me," he said. "And thanks for coming here, at all." Hao shook his head. "I hope you know that when you need me, I'll be there for you, too. I'm sorry if I haven't shown it properly until now, but—"

"I know," Hao shut him up. "And you've been there for me a lot of times already." Hanbin sat up on the bed. He joined Hao on the edge of the mattress.

He took Hao's hand. "There isn't much to do here if we don't go to the beach, though." Hao laughed hard, because Hanbin's face was worried but it was just him making fun of him, clearly.

"We can watch YouTube," Hao said, already fishing his phone out from the pocket of his shorts. Hanbin stopped his hand. "Can't we?"

"Can I kiss you?" Hanbin asked, instead. Hao rolled his eyes, why was he even asking? Hadn't he been clear? He didn't answer, he kissed him first. Hanbin exhaled softly, already kissing him back. They wouldn't get tired of it anytime soon, Hao was certain of it. To the point that he kinda wondered how he was supposed to go back to his everyday life, when all he wanted to do was to be kissed by Hanbin all the time. Hanbin pushed him back against the mattress, and Hao didn't resist in the slightest. Hanbin was sweet with the way he didn't fully lean onto him, but Hao pulled him closer, grabbing at the back of his leg and pulling him exactly where he wanted him: between his legs. Hanbin broke away from the kiss.

"What?" Hao asked, snappy. "I like you, Hanbin. I thought I'd been clear. I want you, too." Hanbin was a bit frozen, planted on his lower arms to keep himself from laying all his weight on him. "I'm not going to hide the fact that I'm fucking attracted to you, physically," Hao wanted Hanbin to snap out of it and kiss him again. He wanted

everything, with him, be it a beach house when they hit retirement age or his hand inside of him. “Bin-ah.”

“Yeah,” Hanbin said, a bit weakly. “I just-” Hao was getting impatient. If this was going nowhere, they could at least resume normal positions. “I want you, too,” Hanbin said. *Oh*. “It’s all so new,” Hanbin added. “What if I do something wrong?”

Hao sighed. “Then I tell you and you do it better the next time,” he said. “And the same goes for me, though. I’m not this sex guru you think I am,” he laughed. It was absurd. “Hanbin, as long as we’re talking, everything will be well. About this, and about anything else, too.”

Hanbin was nodding, but he was also getting away from him. Hao sat up a bit, propping himself on his elbows. “Aren’t you nervous?” Hanbin asked.

“No,” Hao answered truthfully. “I trust you,” he added. “And if we get it wrong we’ll get it right sooner or later.” Hanbin was looking at him with his round puppy eyes. “I won’t change my mind about us based on how we fuck,” he said, straight to the point. “Even if I’m sure we won’t have any problems.”

“How-” Hanbin’s cheeks were so damn red. Hao couldn’t hold back the laughter erupting from his throat. Hanbin was slightly taken aback.

“I’m sorry,” he said between laughter. “I just- I love the way you blush at the tiniest thing.” Hanbin rolled his eyes. Hao kissed his cheek. It was burning up under his lips. It was Hanbin who kissed him on his mouth after that, which made Hao think that he’d been persuasive enough. Hanbin moved back on top of him, and Hao loved how it made him feel half breathless, half euphoric. Hanbin was sliding his hands underneath his shirt and his touch was sure, certain, and it felt like he’d already understood Hao in every way that mattered. Hanbin’s mouth moved onto his neck, Hao forgot how to breathe. He could only move his hands to hold Hanbin’s body against his own. Hanbin shifted his weight to be able to kiss at Hao’s neck even better, moving down along it, until he reached the point where it fused with his collarbone and Hao — *shit*, Hao’s voice came out on its own, with no control, in a whiny moan that he’d never heard from himself.

Hanbin was still pressing his lips against his skin, when he spoke, his breath hot and humid and mind-blowing. “Tell me what you want me to do,” he said, insane boy that he was. “Please,” polite, too. Hao shuddered. Hanbin had the singular ability to send him crazy without trying to. Hao wanted to cry, how was Hanbin real? How was Hanbin on his same page, too, after all this shit? But what he wanted from him, now, was the most important thing, because Hanbin was waiting for an answer and Hao was going to give him one.

“Fuck,” he cursed. Hanbin kissed his neck again, Hao wrapped a leg over his hips. The shock of the sudden contact, groin against groin, sent both of them gasping. “I don’t know,” he confessed. “I can’t think,” it was a half sob, because Hanbin had gripped his leg and hiked it further up on his hips. It was too much and too little, and he wanted Hanbin everywhere, he wanted him to kiss every inch of him once more, he wanted him to make him cry and to make him whine and to touch him where no one had and to, please, have him sobbing from his touch. “I don’t know,” he repeated. “Your hands,” he said, though, because he *had* to say something, and that seemed a good enough answer.

Hanbin moved away by a tiny bit, too much for Hao’s desperate need. He only lifted Hao’s shirt and Hao scrambled to get rid of it. Hanbin’s quiet laughter at the rush he was clearly in should have humbled him, but Hao didn’t care. They exchanged a glance and Hao saw his same desire mirrored in Hanbin’s eyes. He sighed, how the fuck were they this lucky? Hanbin ran a hand along his waist, Hao closed his eyes again. Hanbin was holding him and kissing him and Hao couldn’t process any of it, he just let him do whatever. And then, Hanbin took his hand to his underwear and Hao helped him by only lifting himself up a bit and then Hanbin gave him a heart attack because his mouth was exactly where his thigh met his groin. Hao let his hands reach into Hanbin’s hair. It was like he couldn’t find the words, in any of the languages he spoke, and Hanbin was almost biting at the inner seam of his thighs and Hao was widening his legs without even meaning to, but he needed- “Bin-ah,” he only managed to say.

Hanbin shifted again on the bed, and Hao opened his eyes just a bit, just a fraction, to see his dark hair still between his legs and shit, his head felt light. Hanbin spread both his hands on his thighs, Hao felt his breath stagger. Hanbin’s hand reached under, and he slid one finger against Hao’s rim. “Are you sure?” Hanbin’s voice was at the lowest he’d ever heard it. “Do you want me to?”

Hao made a big effort to reply. “Yeah,” he said. And then. “I want it,” and “fuck, I’m a mess.”

Hanbin got up. Away from him entirely. Hao lifted himself up just enough to see where he’d gone, and then he walked back, and if Hao hadn’t already made a fool of himself, he would lose every dignity now. Because Hanbin was there, with his face flushed and his hair sticking a bit everywhere, with his lips red and swollen and a blooming kiss mark right where the neck of his T-shirt hovered. And he had a bottle of lube in his hand. Hao let himself fall back onto the mattress, both his hands covering his face. Hanbin was quick to take his position back, and Hao thought that he

would die like this, Hanbin's hand keeping his knee down, his other hand wetly pushing inside of him, his mouth on his hips, on his thigh, on his skin all the time, because he'd already guessed that Hao needed the distraction from the burn. Hanbin had breached in, and he let him get comfortable before trying to move his finger up and down, slowly, and Hao wasn't shutting up, not by chance. One finger became two, only because Hao begged for it, and this was so good. It hurt, a bit, but only because Hao wasn't used to the stretch, and Hanbin's fingers had the perfect shape for this, god, he was made to fuck Hao like this, maybe. He angled his hand differently and a shock ran through Hao, hot and electric and like he'd been lit up from the inside.

"There?" Hanbin's voice, shit, the way it echoed against Hao's own body. Hao whined, again. Hanbin hit that spot again, and again, and if it felt this good with just two of his fingers Hao couldn't begin to imagine what having Hanbin's whole cock inside of himself would be like. Hanbin's fingers were suddenly not enough.

He felt tears on his cheeks, when Hanbin pushed his fingers inside of him again. "Please," he groaned.

"What, Hao-yah?" Hanbin wasn't stopping, he was relentless. Hao would come like this. He was sure. It was unavoidable. He moved his own hand to touch his cock, or- "Let me," Hanbin said.

"No," Hao's voice was broken. "Yes, I mean," he said, zero coherence, zero logic in what he was saying. Hanbin was jerking him off again, the second time in one day, and Hao had the stark realization that he would never have enough. Hanbin's shirt was collateral damage in how Hao came. *I'm sorry*, he tried to say, but it didn't come out and Hanbin was already kissing him anyway. Hao breathed into him like he could give him life. It was too soon, and he knew it, but he loved Hanbin. This. The thing inside his chest, the thing burning behind his eyes, was love. Nothing else.

Hao didn't know where he found the strength to maneuver Hanbin to sit on the mattress, but sure enough he was guiding him to lay down and peeling clothes off of him at the same time. Hanbin was hard, of course he was, he'd only been focusing on Hao, like the stupid selfless idiot he always was. Hao got up on wobbly legs. "You left them in the kitchen?"

"What?" Hanbin's eyebrows knit in confusion.

"The condoms," he replied. Hanbin shook his head. He leaned to pick up the shorts Hao had thrown aside. He didn't meet Hao's eyes as he handed him the square package. "You sly asshole," Hao kissed him. It shouldn't make him so happy, the thought that this meant that Hanbin wanted it as much as he did. Hao felt like his heart would burst from everything that had happened in the span of one single day. He got back to sit on Hanbin's knees. "Can I?"

"Anything you want," Hanbin breathed and Hao felt like his fingers were too clumsy to open the condom up and to fit it around Hanbin, but he did it nonetheless and then they were kissing again, but Hao pushed with one hand against Hanbin's stomach, laying him down again, and with his other hand grabbed his length and pushed himself gracelessly over it, its tip brushing his entrance. He let himself slide down a little, his muscles struggling to accommodate the new intrusion. He let out a sharp gasp. The stretch it was giving him, it burned, it hurt in a way that was also incredibly good and Hanbin wrapped his hands around his waist to help him a bit. Centimeter by centimeter, he took it all.

"Love it," he said, breathless. He felt like he'd never been this full, this satisfied. Hanbin moaned, too, low and rich. Finally. Hao tried to push himself up a bit, then down again. Hanbin's groaning was louder, and Hao tried to do that again, but they'd picked the most uncomfortable position and yet he wasn't going to try to move them to a different one. He tried to roll his hips a bit and it was him who gasped, and Hanbin only took a sharp breath. Oh. This worked, then. "Good?"

"Again," Hanbin sobbed, "Do that again." It took too long for Hao to find a way to move, and it was uncoordinated, it was messy but it wasn't bad, and Hanbin was clinging to him and breathing irregularly against his chest, buried in it, and Hao only ever wanted him to be happy, to be fulfilled and satisfied and so he tried his best, though he had no idea how to make it work. Hanbin muttered something against his skin, but Hao didn't get it, and then Hanbin's voice stopped and his hands tightened and yeah, there he was. Hao ran his hands through his hair as he came, in sobs and tiny whines.

Hanbin didn't let go of him for a long while, and Hao allowed him to. He knew they were gross, he knew they should start tidying everything up and set themselves on the way back home. He didn't give a fuck. "Hao," Hanbin sounded still a bit out of it. It was cute. "How are we going to make it work once we're back home?" Hao stiffened a bit. "I mean, it's an honest question. The last two weeks were hell for me, we never saw each other and I want to do everything in my power to never get to that again."

If Hao wasn't still wrapped around him, he would close the distance between them in an instant. But Hanbin was already there, in his arms, warm and solid. "We'll find a way," he said. "We found it until here, didn't we?" Hanbin nodded, his hair was tickling Hao's collarbones.

"You're so sure," Hanbin said. Of course Hao was sure. How could he not be sure, when this was the only person who had made him want to risk it all? When Hanbin was the only person who had taught him what being loved without filters could mean? "It's a lot to ask," Hanbin went on, "but please don't let me doubt that we'll make it. I know we will, but I sometimes get scared. Hold my hand through it, won't you?"

Hao closed his eyes tight. "I will," he promised. Hanbin unwrapped himself and his eyes were shiny, but his smile was bright. Hao smiled back at him. Hanbin left a soft kiss on his cheek, almost shy. Ridiculous, after everything they'd just done. "We should clean up," Hao said.

"We should," Hanbin echoed. Hao kissed him again. They still had time, after all.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — 2d ago

hao was ill yesterday and today he's on stage again? are they insane??
why won't they let him rest a bit?

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimawake — 5h ago

can i say i miss when we used to get some more glimpse of hao with his bf? i know they're active with their groups but it was so nice when their schedules overlapped for a while in early summer :(

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimawake — 2h ago

oh! they breathed!! taerae (5stars) said on his bbl that he's watching a drama hao recommended and hanbin told him he would spoil him the ending if taerae isn't nice at home
cuties

Gunwook was making a disgusted face. "No." He said. Jiwoong turned to him in a whirl. They were all cramped in their living room and one of their managers was standing in front of them, with a folder in his hands.

"What do you mean no, Gunwook-ah?" Seokjae, the manager, sounded surprised. He had good reason for it, because it was the first time that Gunwook ever said no to an explicit request from the company.

"No, I won't talk to Hanbin hyung to convince him to do something he doesn't want to do. He's an adult, and he's also an intelligent one and I'm not going to interfere in this matter," Gunwook shrugged and he kept standing between Hanbin and the manager, too. Naturally, his escape to the coast had become known to the company. Ji Ara wasn't pleased with the way he and Hao had gone behind her back, stating over and over that they risked getting caught and god knows what would have happened. Hanbin had refused to reply to her. She'd sent him fifteen different emails asking him to please agree to sign an informal document that authorized her to make an official statement on his relationship with Hao and its end.

"I don't understand," Hanbin said, now, not to Ji Ara, who wouldn't surely debase herself by stepping foot in their dorm, but to their manager. "Can't we just let people forget about us?" He'd said this three thousand times already. "If people don't hear any more news about us, they'll move on, with or without a statement."

Seokjae sighed, he put the folder on the couch no one was sitting on and he ran a hand through his hair. "What do you even want me to say, guys? It's not like I'm here of my own will," he looked a bit exasperated. "You're right, too, in my opinion, but the boss wants the document signed, and she's not letting any of us breathe."

Taerae picked up the folder, opened it. "Do you want some tea, Seokjae hyung?" Jiwoong sighed loudly. "What?"

"I'm calling Ji Ara," Jiwoong said, and he pulled out her phone.

"To tell her what?" Matthew stopped him, taking the phone in his hands.

"Yeah, hyung," Taerae interjected again. "What are you going to tell her?" Then he turned to Hanbin. He threw a

glance at Gunwook. “Unless.”

“No,” Hanbin said, preemptively.

“Unless what?” Jiwoong should learn not to ask questions.

“Unless we threaten her to open the can of worms that are all our private lives,” he stated, calmly.

Gunwook’s eyes were as wide as he could get them. “My private life is no can of worms,” he said. “I’ve never even gone out with anyone,” he added.

“Shut up,” Taerae said, borderline rudely. “Wouldn’t it be fun, though?” He was crazy.

“No, it wouldn’t,” Hanbin said. “It’s not fun when there’s five hundred articles about your life,” Taerae had the decency to look away. “We’re not changing strategies.”

Seokjae was a bit shocked by the whole exchange. “Should I know which can of worms, at least? Just so I can keep it closed.”

Taerae raised an eyebrow. “Oh,” he took a look at the other four members. “Two of them are dating each other, not hard to guess who, and then there’s me.” Hanbin felt a headache arise. And good riddance to the quiet night at the dorm he’d planned with Hao.

Seokjae was frowning deeply. “You?”

Taerae let out a bright laughter. “Oh, if we wanted to find one single dating scandal for me it would be hard, there’d be, like, at least three from just last year alone,” he said. Hanbin was hearing this for the first time, too. “All men,” he made sure to say. “All famous.” Taerae shrugged. “Ji Ara would look like she’s running an escort service,” he concluded.

Seokjae sighed. “Is it true?” He was asking the rest of them. Taerae fought back a smirk that was clearly the tell on his bluff. Hanbin nodded, emphatically.

“Yeah,” Jiwoong said, without much thought. “He’s popular.” Matthew nodded, too. Gunwook just shrugged.

“So,” Seokjae tried to wrap it up, “If I tell her all this, and that this *all* stays silent forever, the only thing she has to do is to let the whole break-up go?”

“Yup,” Gunwook said, with a big smile. “Do you want that tea or not, hyung?”

They were still cramped in their living room, only now Seokjae was back at the company — maybe being skinned alive by Ji Ara, maybe setting them free for a while — and Hao was sitting on the couch, half leaning into Hanbin, laughing super hard at the tale of their evening that Gunwook was giving. Gyuvin, who had come over with Hao, had tears in his eyes from how hard he was laughing. “If they try to find dirt on you, though,” Hao said to Taerae, without moving from where he was. “What are they going to find?”

“Nothing,” Taerae said, and he had to take off his glasses because he, too, was cry-laughing.

“He’s been trying to get a fucking nerd from his department in uni to notice him for, how long?” Gunwook was well-informed.

“Since he enrolled?” Taerae said, with no ounce of self-respect. “He’s two years my junior, too. God, imagine they find my pathetic ass texts to this other student. *Anyway*,” he laughed it off, “Don’t thank me too much for pushing Ara-ssi off your asses, she’ll be back soon.”

Hanbin shrugged, nuzzling a bit closer to Hao, too. “She can try all she wants,” he said. “I hope she will understand that she’s wasting her time, this once.”

Hao took his hand, silently, and then he turned to the others. “So, what’s the plan for tonight? Movie? Games?”

“There’s that game we played the last time,” Matthew pitched in. “Now that we all know the rules already so we don’t have to waste an hour and a half explaining it, can we play?” He was so excited, and Hanbin didn’t have the heart to tell him that, no, not all of them knew the rules. Gyuvin hadn’t been there that time.

“Uh,” Gunwook brought it up. “Well, Gyuvin hyung, just try to follow along?” Gyuvin elected to just play together with Gunwook and that was it, their evening proceeded with no hiccup, serene and spontaneous and with a natural quality to it that could have made Hanbin think that these people had been his friends for all his life. It was funny how he’d built himself a second family in his workplace, after all. Sweating together in practice rooms, crying at instructors’ feedback as teenagers, sharing secrets no one else knew, confiding fears and hopes and dreams. All those things had gifted Hanbin four brothers. And then there was Hao. Hao who’d fit himself right in, who’d waited, who’d listened, Hao who was winning again at the same game and who was also play-fighting with Matthew who was accusing him of cheating, again. Hao, who was probably actually cheating. Hao, who never, ever, took a step away from Hanbin’s side.

“It’s your turn, Hanbinie,” Jiwoong called him, from his other side. Hanbin played his turn, so bad that everyone

laughed at him, and then it was Jiwoong who kept talking to him in whispers. “Were you thinking about something just now?”

Hanbin nodded, and he took a long look at the room they were in. “I was thinking that I was lucky to meet all of you in this life,” he said. “I love you guys a lot,” he meant it.

“Cute,” Jiwoong replied, and he was smiling from ear to ear.

“Thank you,” Hanbin found himself saying. “For keeping us all together through it all, and for making us into the team we are.” He tried to focus back on the game. If he was honest, he hated board games. But the rest of his friends seemed to love them, so, here he was, trying to do his best and failing at that.

Jiwoong leaned his head on his shoulder. “I can’t live without you guys,” he said, low. “So, there’s that. I might just be a selfish leader, and a selfish hyung. I just want to keep you all with me,” he laughed, too. Hanbin patted his wavy hair lightly.

“Yeah,” he echoed. “I’m the same as you, then.” Then he thought about something, a flash in his mind all of a sudden. “Do you think we can, like, formally adopt Hao’s kids too? I think I want them in our space, too.”

Jiwoong didn’t move, still leaning on him. Hanbin had always liked when his hyung acted younger than he was. It made him believe that he wouldn’t give in to the pressure the world liked putting on him. “Haven’t we been doing that since you two were brought together by the company?” Jiwoong was quiet, saying this. “I want them around, so you’ll have to keep Hao around, too.”

“What a sacrifice to ask me,” Hanbin joked. “I’ll have to make such an effort to like him,” he added. “Hyung.”

“Yeah?” Jiwoong raised the cards in his hands, throwing a quick glance at them.

“We’ll stay friends even when we’re older, right?” He was going to have to play his turn soon, again. “You and I, but us and the others, too.”

“Of course,” Jiwoong moved back, picking one card from the center of the table. “No way out now.”

It was late enough, when the game wrapped up. Taerae got up with a yawn, and he picked up as many glasses and chips bags as he could, muttering that he’d finish it all the following morning, before heading to their room. Gunwook had trapped Matthew and Gyuvin in a conversation about god knows what, but they were all visibly tired, too.

“Hey,” Hao re-emerged from the kitchen, where he’d thrown away a few paper towels. He wrapped his arms around Hanbin’s neck. He’d been clingy all night, and Hanbin couldn’t bring himself to mind it. They’d agreed to only meet inside, in their dorms, where no one could actually spot them. But it was complicated to find a moment where their schedules were free at the same time, thinking that they could find a moment completely alone was unimaginable. Hanbin kissed him on the cheek, soft and quick. Hao’s smile was rewarding, in its happiness.

“Do you want to go home right now?” He asked. “I can drive the two of you back, if you need.”

Hao kept hugging him like that, uncomfortable and lovely. “Nah,” he said. “I’m trying to drive more these days,” he added. “But I don’t want to go home straight away either.” Good. “I had fun tonight,” he went on. “Next time, come over to mine. I have a single room, you know.” Hanbin stepped away from him, because they couldn’t talk about it like this with the others not five meters away from them. Hao was still looking at him. Hanbin had to look away.

“Let’s sit down,” he said, and he grabbed Hao’s hand to pull him down on the couch with him. He made a point to sit as far away from Hao as he could. At least, until the others were still in the room. It took too long for them to finish the weird conversation Gunwook was feeding, and then, finally, Matthew seemed to catch up. He all but begged Gyuvin to go and check out something with him, something he kept in his own room. With Jiwoong already occupying the shower, they were at last alone. Hao didn’t wait. He closed the distance between them in a fraction of a second and then he was bringing a careful hand to Hanbin’s face, running his thumb along his cheek.

“I feel like I’ve been waiting to kiss you forever,” Hao said, just like that, as if it was some normal statement. Hanbin moved closer yet, and Hao’s lips latched onto his. Hao smelled like shampoo and fabric softener and he was kissing Hanbin in a series of slow, shallow kisses, clearly trying not to get carried away with it. Hanbin let his hand tangle in his light sweater, only brushing against his skin through it, without any direct contact. Hao’s breath hitched against his lips when Hanbin brought his other hand to tangle in his hair. Hanbin kissed him once again, and one last time, and he parted from it. They couldn’t. Not tonight. Not here. It was how it was going to be, and they both knew it. Hao took a shaky breath, and his tongue darted to lick his lips as he, too, shifted a bit farther from Hanbin. Hanbin would have liked to kiss him again. He only took his hand, though.

“I talked to the company,” Hanbin said. “I asked them if I can hold some workshops again, after promotions are over next month.” Hao was looking at him in that way of his that made Hanbin think that he would win wars and conquer planets only for this look on his face. “They said it should be possible,” he went on. “I know you had promised

to update that company junior about it, so you can tell him about this.”

Hao tangled their fingers together. “Can I attend?”

“If you’re free,” Hanbin didn’t want to hope. “But we can dance together whenever you want,” he said. “We’ve only done that too few times, I’d like it if we found the time.”

Hao shifted closer to him once again. It was like there was a magnet dragging them together and they could only fight against it for a short time. “We should have just been in the same group,” Hao said. “I wouldn’t have to find all sorts of stratagems to see my boyfriend, then.”

It always sent an electric jolt down Hanbin’s stomach, whenever Hao called him his boyfriend. He hoped he never got used to it. He hoped it could keep sending him crazy twenty years in the future. “Creativity keeps the relationship livelier,” Hanbin made it up on the spot. “At least we won’t get bored.”

Hao nodded. “Cause I would get bored of you, right,” he deadpanned. He couldn’t know, though. Maybe he would. Hanbin didn’t believe it either, but it wasn’t something they could really know, truly.

“I want to audition for some dance programs, too,” Hanbin said. It was something he’d been reasoning with himself for a while. A judge on dance competitions, on TV. Or a participant, too. “The others are going to have a lot of individual activities and, now that my individual activity is no longer supposed to be *dating Zhang Hao*, I would like to try something with dancing.”

Hao snuggled closer to him. “I’m happy if you’re happy,” he said. “As long as you keep up with dating this Zhang Hao dude, too. I feel like it wouldn’t be fair to him if you started ignoring him all of a sudden.” Hanbin laughed. He left a loud kiss on his forehead.

“I’ll date Zhang Hao, too,” he said. Hao smiled extra wide. Hanbin liked this clingy version of him. “Hao, when I’m done with promotions for our comeback, would you like to go and visit my parents with me?”

Hao turned his head to face him better. “Of course I’d like to,” he said, in a rush, trampling over his words. “Of course.” Hanbin’s heart was beating extra loud in his chest. He nodded, speechless. Hao kissed him again.

“Oh,” Gyuvin’s voice made them jump. Hanbin jerked away from Hao in a split second. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to-” he cleared his voice. “I just wanted to say that if you want to go back home, hyung, I’m good to go. But if you need more privacy, I’ll just-”

“No,” Hao cut him off. His ears were bright red. “We don’t-” he stopped. “We can go. Just go grab your bag and jacket. Put your shoes on,” he sounded a bit too worked up, but Hanbin tried to hold back his laughter.

“Alright,” Gyuvin said. “Sorry,” he mouthed to Hanbin, again. Hanbin smiled at him.

Hao got up from the couch. Hanbin did the same. He watched as they picked up their stuff and put their shoes on, and then he held the door open for them. Gyuvin hugged him goodbye, Hao lingered back.

“Text me when you’re home,” Hanbin said to him. Hao had a weird expression on his face, it was like he was hating saying goodbye to him. Hanbin could understand, frankly. Hao stepped closer to him one last time, kissing his mouth once, twice, three times. Another one. Hanbin was in a daze, too. If he could, he would pull him back inside, back on his couch. He would make sure to pin him down on it and keep him there until they weren’t both happy with how much time they’d spent all over each other. “Ge,” he whispered, against his mouth. “Hao-ge,” Hao stopped. “You should go,” he hated this as much as Hao did. “Drive safe?”

Hao brushed his hand against Hanbin’s. “Okay,” he said. “Good night, then.”

Hanbin was lying in his bed, eyes fixed on the wooden panel of Matthew’s top bunk. Was this how it would be from now on? Stolen kisses and being walked in on by their friends? *Let’s give us the time to figure it out*, Hao had said. He was right, of course. Hanbin just wished they’d both had more courage to face their mutual attraction earlier on, while everyone was still on board with them being seen around.

“Hao hyung is completely gone for you,” Matthew’s voice cut through the silence. “Not that you’re any better, but he’s, like, a different person when it’s about you.”

Taerae groaned from his own bed. “You’re right,” he said. “But it’s too late for this conversation, sleep. Both of you.”

Hanbin didn’t know what to say, so he just turned on his other side. “Do you think it’s weird that I keep thinking I’ll be with him for my whole life?”

Taerae sighed, loudly. “It’s three AM,” he said. “And it’s weird, but it’s not weirder than your whole relationship story. So, man, just keep him.” He yawned, at a super loud volume. “Can we sleep, now?”

“Hyung,” Matthew said. “I know I was wrong at the start of this story,” they’d cleared that up well enough.

Matthew had had zero trust in Hao's returning Hanbin's feelings. It was due to his over protectiveness. And to the fact that Taerae hadn't shared with him how Hao had been venting to him about his own feelings for a while. "But this is *the* love of your life. The sooner you face it, the easier it will be."

"Now don't act like you're this confident expert," Taerae shot back. "You were whining just earlier about your own stuff."

"Didn't you want to sleep?" Matthew rebutted.

"Thanks, guys," Hanbin stepped in. "Yeah, let's sleep now." Taerae scoffed. No one said anything else.

Kuanjuiii

- > *worst best friend of all times*
- > *that's you, by the way*
- > *i was on the phone with seungeon, who is a much better person than you.*
- > *he told me you and hanbin finally figured your shit out?*
- > *why did i have to find out from him and not you?*
- > *you're the worst.*
- > *i'm seriously angry.*

janghao

- > *listen i wanted to tell you face to face*
 - > *like in video call*
- > *but you were never available for it*
- > *you had time to call seungeon though???*
 - > *i mean.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *don't make it my fault, now.*
- > *i would have found the time if you'd told me what it was about.*

janghao

- > *well then we wouldn't have needed to call??*
 - > *anyway*
 - > *i'm sorry*

Kuanjuiii

- > *fuck off*
- > *how's it with hanbin, then?*

janghao

- > *we're trying hard to find time to meet up*
 - > *but it's good*
- > *this single week we've been dating for real*

Kuanjuiii

- > *bro you'll have to tell me more if you want me to forgive you*

janghao

- > *you only think about ONE thing jesus christ*

Kuanjuiii

- > *so?*

janghao

> *yeah.*

> *it was great.*

> *can't wait to have the chance again*

Kuanjuiii

> *details.*

> *come on.*

janghao

> *why?????*

Kuanjuiii

> *who topped?*

> *how big?*

janghao

> *i'm not going to*

> *i'm blocking you.*

hanbinsung

> *my shooting tomorrow's been postponed to 12AM*

> *pls tell me you're still free*

> *i miss you it's been like a week since i last saw you*

> *i hate this job some days*

hao ♥

> *come over then*

> *i have the morning free*

> *god i can't believe i get to see you three days before we planned to*

> *i'll call you later but i'm so happy about this? what have you turned me into!*

Hao waited, and he waited, and he waited some more, because he was dumb enough to have woken up way earlier than the time Hanbin was supposed to be coming over. So he was restlessly checking the things laying around in his room and wondering if Hanbin would find it embarrassing that he'd printed the photos from all their dates and put them in a photo album that was on his nightstand, or that he'd kept the stupid Pokémon card Hanbin had taken out of a snack months ago, or that he'd found clothes for the raccoon plushie. And, if he thought about it, Hao knew that all these things would be fine. But he just couldn't shake the nerves from the thought that Hanbin would be here in just, approximately, thirty minutes now, and that this was only the third time they would *hang out* as boyfriends and that he would get to see Hanbin after a whole week of video calls only, after a whole week where Hanbin had been whisked away by his dense activities. Success was good, but surely Hao would be as happy if they worked less and were together more often. Was he being dramatic? Sure. People had long distance relationships all the time, but he wanted Hanbin with him at all hours, he wanted to talk to him constantly, to tell him every thought in his head, to hear what he had to say about the small and the big things and, maybe he should consider visiting a doctor, because he was downright obsessed with Hanbin, but he was pretty sure it was a mutual thing and, honestly, it was fine like that.

As soon as Hanbin texted him to open the door, Hao felt stupidly aware that this meet-up was another step forward. It was the first time Hanbin visited him, and they would have to find a way to be around Hao's members without imposing on them, and Hao wondered how other people did this, having lovers over without going crazy about it.

"I brought you breakfast," Hanbin said, first thing. He was wearing a white t-shirt and his face was so fucking beautiful that it felt like he was wearing precious gold all over. "I hope I got the right coffee order and the right food, because--"

I think I love you, Hao thought. "You didn't have to," he said. And, "Did you buy something for yourself, too? Have you eaten?" And, finally, after seeing that Hanbin couldn't fight back a smile, "Come inside."

"Oh, Hanbin hyung," Seungeon emerged from his room, right as they were passing it on their way to Hao's. Hao didn't know how to behave. "Isn't it early, Hao-ge? What are you doing up at seven in the morning if you have no schedule?"

Hanbin let out a breathy laugh. "I asked him to squeeze in some time for me," he said. Looking at him, Hao found him looking back with a kind of gaze that was going to make him lose his mind if he didn't get to kiss Hanbin in the next five minutes. And to think that adults used to praise Hao for being a disciplined kid.

"I see," Seungeon said, and he threw a sideways glance at Hao. "I'll be in my room if you need me. I hope you don't need me, though." Hanbin's laughter resumed. Hao half dragged him inside of his room, made him leave the take-away bag on his cluttered desk and, all in the span of three seconds, threw his arms around Hanbin. Hanbin chuckled, hugging him back, hooking his chin over his shoulder. Hao's heart finally calmed down.

They ate sitting on the floor, as Hanbin told a silly story about how the lady from the café he'd come from had wondered if he was an actor, because he was hiding his face behind a mask. Hanbin had told her he actually sang, and she'd been rather disappointed and had suggested he started acting instead. "You'd be great at acting," Hao told him, between bites of a sweet monstrosity he wouldn't have even considered eating, if it wasn't for Hanbin. "Look how good you were at pretending to have a thing for me."

"Yah," Hanbin was laughing again, and Hao himself was smiling extra wide, as if it was the only thing his face was able to do. "Would you really like me to act?"

Hao turned to face him better. "I would like you to do the things *you* want to do," he replied, honest. "I'd be jealous of whoever you'd have to have a screen romance with, but I'd support you and I'd cheer you on, and I'd ask you to bring stage clothes home so I can stop being jealous."

Hanbin raised a single eyebrow. "It's an interesting picture," he said, and Hao piled the empty food containers one on top of the other. "If you ever feel like that about the stuff I already perform with, please do tell."

Hao studied his face for a few moments. When he'd met him, he used to study him to try and figure out what he thought of Hao. Did he hate him? Did he think it was unlucky that they'd been paired together like that? Now, though, he could read Hanbin like an open book, he knew the meaning of most of his expressions. But now Hanbin was flirting in a much heavier way than usual, and Hao didn't know how much he could play into it. How far he could take it. Hanbin moved a tiny bit closer. "The same goes for you," Hao said. "Hanbin."

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for buying breakfast," he said, and he took the nearly empty cardboard glass from Hanbin's hand. Hanbin's eyes immediately fell to his lips. Hao moved to kiss him, but Hanbin skirted it at the last second.

"We can't spend the next four hours just on top of each other," Hanbin said, in a whisper. Hao frowned. "We're only meeting in our rooms, but we need to find a way to do something else too, okay?" Hao nodded. It was true, he was right, they'd built their relationship on much more solid grounds than the way they couldn't be assed to keep their hands off each other.

"I have a long list of dramas to catch up with," Hao whispered back. "But, please, let me kiss you first?"

Hanbin didn't need to be told twice. He let Hao climb on top of his legs and he set his hands on his hips like he, too, hadn't wanted anything but this. Hao started with kissing him on his cheek, soft, light. Hanbin breathed softly against him. The smell of coffee on his breath was probably matched by Hao, too. Hao kissed his chin, still light, then his jaw, and then Hanbin's hands gripped him way tighter. Hao fought back a smile, but he failed. He kissed him on the lips, and it was met with a sigh and Hanbin kissing him back with something akin to desperation. Hao adjusted the angle, sliding his tongue inside Hanbin's mouth. Hanbin was letting him do whatever he wanted, he was bending his head back, Hao was towering over him despite being enveloped in his hug and it was insane, how much he'd missed this boy over the span of just seven days. Sure, kissing him like this was different, it was way better than the rushed kisses in Hanbin's dorm living room. Hanbin broke the kiss and reinitiated it, with his lips chasing after Hao's continuously. Hao shifted closer to him yet, while Hanbin's hands slid under his shirt. His hands were warm, and Hao loved how he touched him, strong and delicate at once. Hanbin moved to kiss him on the neck and Hao sighed. "Oh, fuck," he said, in a shallow moan. Hanbin was licking him over his pulse point. He sucked on his skin. He was going to

leave a bruise, Hao would have to show up to dance practice with a fucking hickey on his neck. People would know who did it. He stretched his throat even further, letting Hanbin get a better access to it. Hanbin's mouth was hot and the sound of his lips kissing his neck was hotter and wet and Hao thought back at the faintest traces he'd left on his thighs last time. He felt his legs already trembling. "Bed," he tried to suggest. It came out as a whine.

Hanbin had switched them, in the move from the floor to the bed, and he was now hovering on top of Hao, still busy kissing him. This time, it was Hao who had his hands underneath Hanbin's shirt. The muscles on his back were shifting everytime he moved to match Hao's kisses. It was addictive. Hao wanted to do this forever. Hanbin moved back, slowly but still suddenly. "Can I," he started. His red cheeks would've been cute, if not for the way he was looking at Hao like he wanted to eat him whole. Hao knew the feeling because he shared it. "Can I blow you?" Hao's head was light, he couldn't find the words to reply. He kissed Hanbin again. Hanbin's hand moved to his waist, to the band of his sweatpants. "I've-" Hanbin started again.

"You've what?" Hao wanted him to, of course he did.

"Been thinking about it," Hanbin said, and he hid his flushed face against Hao's collar. It didn't help. Hao was bursting with desire and this wasn't helping and Hanbin wanted to suck him off and he was being shy about it and Hao was going to have to marry this man, he thought. "But, if-"

"You've thought about it? You've been thinking about us? Like this? What else?" Hao ran his hand through Hanbin's messed up hair.

"That," Hanbin replied, and he lifted his face. Hao's breath stopped in his chest. Hanbin wasn't shy, now. Hanbin was ravenous. "And me fucking you again, on top of you. And you fucking me, too. Because I'd like that, too. Your fingers inside of me, your legs over my shoulders, I've thought about everything. Hao, if there is a way I can have you, I want it."

Hao closed his eyes. He couldn't do this while looking at Hanbin. "You're insane," he said. "And I want that too. All of that," he was quick to add. "I've jerked off to these thoughts," he concluded, because there was no use in denying this. "Ever since you first kissed me."

"So, can I?" Hanbin asked again.

"Yeah," Hao's mind was already clouded. "You kinda have to, now." It was stupid, how much he wanted Hanbin. It shouldn't be possible to have this kind of feelings for someone, it defied survival instinct, the way he would do everything Hanbin asked of him. Hanbin kissed his cheek, his neck, lightly, almost sweet. And then he shifted on top of the mattress, until he was kneeling at the far end of the bed, his hands on Hao's knees. Hao let his legs fall apart. Hanbin adjusted himself between them. Hao couldn't look away from him, from the way his hands were hiking up his legs, hot, and stopping on the hem of his shirt. Hao was breathless. Hanbin pushed his shirt up, kissing the skin below his navel. "God," Hao breathed out. Distantly, he realized he should be quiet. Hanbin pushed his shirt further up, uncovering a larger part of his stomach, Hao didn't have the strength to take the shirt off, he thought he would have to make do with keeping it like that, crumpled and in the way. Hanbin didn't seem to mind, with the way he was already trying to push down his pants. His impatience was driving Hao even crazier.

"Hao," Hanbin's voice had dropped way lower than usual. Hao tried to take a breath, shaky. He couldn't hide the way he was getting harder and harder, but he could at least try not to moan just because Hanbin had called his name. "Help me a bit," Hanbin said. *Oh* . Hao lifted his hips just enough to have Hanbin slide his pants down. Hanbin maneuvered him further, one leg out of his pants and then the other. Then his hands were back on Hao's thighs, and his mouth too, in the inner part of his left thigh. Hao bit his lower lip to keep himself from crying. Hanbin's kisses littered his skin, moving upwards, inwards, and Hao was going to beg him to please put him out of his misery, please touch him, please stop teasing. But Hanbin wasn't teasing, maybe. Maybe he was tasting him. This time, the moan escaping his lips was loud. Hanbin stopped. Hao met his eyes, through the hair that had fallen over them.

"I know," Hao pushed through his teeth. "I'm trying my best here," he felt his cheeks go up in flames. Hanbin's light laughter made him smile, too. "I don't want them to hate us," he said.

"Then keep quiet," Hanbin rebuked. He couldn't even begin to sound commanding, with the way he'd whispered it and the adoration in his eyes and Hao wanted to cry from how much he loved him. Hao nodded his assent, which prompted Hanbin to resume his activities. Fuck. His mouth was so hot. And he wasn't even touching Hao's dick yet. Maybe Hao would die when he did. Maybe his soul would just leave his body forever.

"Bin-ah," he whispered. Hanbin licked along his groin seam. Hao exhaled, as calmly as he could. Not calmly at all. "God, please," he voiced. "*Please* ." Hanbin must love him, too, because he heard him and his fingers closed around his length and then, all of a sudden, the shock of his mouth enveloping him. Hao smothered his groan with his

arm over his mouth. Fuck. *Fuck*. Hanbin started licking. Hao's free hand jolted to reach his hair. He needed to touch at least a part of Hanbin. Hanbin's tongue was sending spirals of pleasure all through Hao's body, and he was also running his fingers under Hao's cock. Hao felt like he was going to catch on fire. "Shit," he said, low. Hanbin wrapped his mouth around him again, and this time he actually took him in further. It was too hot. And it was tight. And Hao was glad that Hanbin was keeping his hands spread on his hips because the way he instinctively jerked his own hips would have hurt him. Hanbin didn't move back, didn't let off in any way. He was going down on him like he was paid to, and he was taking all of Hao's cock down his throat like this was what he was made for, and Hao, shit, Hao was looking at that and he was only thinking that Hanbin was a miracle. Hanbin let him out of his mouth for a second, and then he was already back on it. It hit Hao that he liked it. Hanbin was enjoying this. As if he was reading his mind, Hanbin hummed a bit, and Hao bit back another moan. "Getting there," he said, and it was likely he'd said it in Mandarin, because he had no awareness left in his brain. Hanbin didn't stop. He didn't move back and Hao tried to push him away, because maybe he hadn't fully realized that Hao was going to come. Hanbin stopped him. And Hao let go. Watching Hanbin swallow everything down was enough to send Hao into a crying fit, but he tried his best to keep himself under control. He pulled Hanbin up by his shoulders and he kissed him, uncaring of the bitter taste on his tongue. Hanbin's hands ran up to wrap around his torso, keeping him steady, holding him. Hao kissed him, and kissed him, and again. He would never be able to know when he'd actually fallen for Hanbin, but he knew that he was choosing to love him every day, with every kiss, with every touch, or word or question or simple glance. And he would choose him over and over, forever.

Hanbin's breath hitched, when Hao pulled him to lie on top of him once more. Hao angled his face better, kissing him even deeper. He felt insane, he'd just come, he shouldn't be obsessing over Hanbin like this, but he felt insatiable. He tried to wrap both his legs around his waist, but, in doing so, he realized he was being a bitch. Hanbin was hard, his length was pressing between them, and Hao was ignoring this. He broke their kiss. "Fuck," he breathed. "I'm the worst."

Hanbin frowned a little, and he tried to kiss Hao again. Hao turned away from the kiss. "You're the best, Hao," Hanbin said, incoherently. He ran the pad of his thumb along Hao's jaw, his cheek. "You're so beautiful."

Hao swatted his hand away. "And I'm so selfish," he replied. Hanbin still hadn't caught on, so Hao slipped his hand between the two of them, grazing against Hanbin's crotch. "Let me touch you." Hanbin would say *but you don't have to*, because it was his stupid selfless boyfriend they were talking about. So Hao prevented him. "I want to touch you," Hanbin's eyes had turned round. "If you didn't have to perform tonight I'd finger you, but I don't want to hurt you," he added.

Hanbin's cock was somehow harder, under Hao's tentative hand. "You wouldn't hurt me," Hanbin replied. Hao raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "I've done it before," a flare of jealousy in Hao's stomach. "To myself, I mean. I do that. Occasionally."

"So," Hao said, carefully. "Are you up for it?"

Hanbin considered it, then he locked his eyes with Hao's. "Not today," he eventually said. "And not because you'd hurt me, but because I'm not going to last long, now. It's not worth it." He was smiling a sheepish smile, completely out of place in this setting. Hao smiled back at him. "Next time," Hanbin promised. It wasn't like they were in a rush, Hao agreed. And he pushed his hand inside Hanbin's pants. Jerking him off was a quick, untidy, thing. Hanbin's breath stuttered against Hao's collarbone, in tiny little whines. Hao told him how pretty he sounded, how great he felt, he whispered to him how much he liked the wetness on him, and then Hanbin came, and Hao kissed him again, because what else was he supposed to do if he couldn't yell to the whole world that he was in love with him?

When Hao came back to his room, after hitting the bathroom, Hanbin was sitting on his bed, crossed-legs, and he was wearing the clothes Hao had given him. Hao had promised he would wash Hanbin's original outfit, while Hanbin had insisted that he could wash it himself. But Hao had been faster to snatch the dirty pants and underwear away from him and toss them in the washing bin. Now, Hanbin's shoulders were filling one of Hao's larger t-shirts and this was threatening to make Hao tear up a bit. If they ever got to live together, he promised to himself, silently, they would definitely be sharing a wardrobe.

"We still have a lot of time before you're going to your schedule," Hao said, joining Hanbin on the mattress. "Wanna start a drama Gyu's been telling me about? I wanted to watch it with you."

Hanbin's smile was blinding, his eyes all crinkled up. "Yeah," Hanbin said, full of some degree of childish happiness. Hao picked up his laptop from his nightstand. Hanbin shifted to sit against the headboard. "Did you really plan to watch it with me?" He sounded a bit wary.

Hao turned to him, as he waited for his laptop to turn on. "Of course," Hao met his eyes. "I think about our time together all the time," Hao confessed. "I have a list in my head of all the places I want to go with you, of the movies I want to watch with you, of the books I need to discuss with you." Hanbin was just staring at him. "I have so many things I'd love to do with you that I think the next sixty years won't be enough."

Hanbin's eyes were round and shiny and maybe he was holding back tears. Hao smiled at him. He hoped it came out comforting. "I'm the same," Hanbin replied, after a couple seconds. "I see things around and I think to myself that I need to tell you about it, I was in my car earlier and there was a dog on the sidewalk and the only thing I thought was how I couldn't wait to tell you that I'd seen a dog wearing a raincoat." Hao laughed. "So, if sixty years won't be enough, let's live longer than that," Hanbin shrugged.

Hao took a breath, then he dared asking: "Together?"

Hanbin didn't break eye contact. "I'd hope so," he said. Hao had to look away, the intensity of his gaze too much to bear. "Or did you want to get rid of me earlier?"

"Let's just start this fucking show," Hao deflected. Hanbin leaned a bit into him, and his hand found Hao's. Twenty minutes into the first episode, Hao threw a glance at the boy who was still holding his hand, focused on the screen in front of them but also not moving away from Hao by a single inch. "I will never want to get rid of you," he finally replied. Hanbin didn't answer, he just leaned his head a bit more against his shoulder.

rik

> *let's discuss what the best course of action for the future is*

gyub

> *why are we doing this by text if we're all in the same car*

rik

> *because i don't want to say things out loud*

gyub

> *you're incomprehensible to me*

rik

> *can we go back to the point?*

gyub

> *being what?*

rik

> *hanbin hyung was over this morning, while you were sleeping like a baby and therefore didn't notice anything*

gyub

> *i know he was over, i said hi*

> *but what's there to discuss, i don't get it*

rik

> *omg*

> *you didn't have to see the state hao-ge walked out of his room in*

> *i never want to see that again*

gyub

> *i mean*

> *i didn't think hanbin hyung would come over just to stare at hao hyung from up closer*

> *but what would you like to do? like, set rules for how to behave when we have boyfriends (or girlfriends, maybe*

idk) over? like, even for us in the future?

rik

> uhm maybe?

> like, for one, telling us beforehand if he's coming. so i can maybe eject myself from the whole house. then, idk, texting the gc so i won't run into them in the corridor.

gyub

> bro? too much.

rik

> no you didn't SEE him

> i don't want to have to read it on his face

gyub

> homophobe

rik

> i'm literally gay

gyub

> not mutually exclusive

> wait, what?

> you're gay??

> since when?????

rik

> oh. my. god.

hao lovebot @tiredbutawake — 1h ago

i miss hao and hanbin's interactions a bit. they used to be everywhere these last few months and now we have nothing coming from them. i hope they're okay, as a couple

hao lovebot @tiredbutawake — 1h ago

they got a lot of hate too so i wonder if they suffered from it, maybe they don't feel safe sharing it with us anymore.

hao lovebot @tiredbutawake — 1h ago

i can understand the newspapers getting bored with them. but we used to be so in touch with them, ig posts, lives. now they just..... went silent.

hao lovebot @tiredbutawake — 1h ago

i don't even want to think about the idea that they might have broken up. it's simply unbelievable.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimawake — just now

@tiredbutawake girllllll didn't you see hanbin's ig story the other week? hao's shirt. he was wearing it!!! they're okay, they've probably been told to keep quieter it was becoming too controversial maybe.

hao lovebot @tiredbutawake — just now

@ireonaimawake HOW DID I MISS THAT?? i was already a bit inconsolable hehehe

To: Zhang Hao [1 other address CC-ed]

Object: Re: PR Team Request

Dearest Zhang Hao-ssi,

we confirm to you that you will have the aforementioned weekend free of schedule, as will have your group members.

As for your request about blocking the publication of any hypothetical articles about your private activities, we'll be on the lookout for that. However, we advise you to be cautious. The company will issue a reminder against privacy violations, but there is only so much we can do.

Enjoy your time off,

PR team's Seo Mi Ra.

To: Seo Mi Ra

CC: Lee Ryu Tak CEO, Ji A Ra CEO [external address], PRArea [1 other address CC-ed]

Object: Re: Re: PR Team Request

Dear Mi Ra-ssi, thank you for your reply.

I took the liberty to inform our sajangnim about this exchange, as keeping my outings under wraps seemed interesting for him and for Ji sajangnim, too. While remaining extra careful, I'm also trying to take all the necessary preparatory steps not to cause trouble suddenly.

Thank you once more for your hard work, Mi Ra-ssi.

Have a happy weekend, too, with your family!

Zhang Hao.

To: Lee Ryu Tak CEO

Object : n/a

The guy sure knows how to play his cards. You know what? Let's just hope they have actually learnt how to play by the rules and won't get caught. The last thing we need is them coming out about how it was staged and then we also tried to force them apart. Let's leave them be. They'll get tired of each other, sooner or later.

Ara.

To: Ji A Ra CEO

Object: Re:

Good luck if you think that guy's going to get tired of something anytime soon. He's stubborn as shit. But I agree on not waging war against them. It's been an informative project. Let's not repeat the mistake soon.

Ryutak.

“Hanbin, don’t be rude,” his mother’s tone was low, and threatening. His sister smiled smugly on their mom’s side, her arms crossed over her chest. “Areum has every right to want to go to the beach house with her friends, too.”

Hanbin counted to three. And then to five. And to ten. “Okay,” he said, finally. “But I’m not arguing that, I’m arguing that she can go whenever she wants, while me and Hao never have a whole weekend free together, so we wanted to take advantage of that.”

“I can’t go *whenever* I want, I have school,” Areum had to say. She wanted to die. There was no other explanation.

“Fine, then I’ll use your room here,” Hanbin replied, and it was childish and immature and he knew that. “You’ll go to the beach, mom and dad will be with grandma, you won’t have issues with that, right?”

“Gross,” she grimaced. “You could use your own room. I’m not letting you go to the beach just so you can—”

“Areum,” their mom stepped in. They both sighed. “You’re both very vulgar, I didn’t raise my children like that.” Areum rolled her eyes, Hanbin found it hilarious. “Find a way to solve it,” their mother preached, “or no one will go to the beach house. And not just this time.”

“But mom,” Areum started. “Oppa’s already been there with his boyfriend!” Well, true. But she’d also already been there with her school friends. She’d spent a whole week there over the summer. Hanbin thought about his options. Hao was going to meet the rest of Hanbin’s family the very same night, he would be coming over to Hanbin’s family home in a couple hours. So, he had to solve this smartly. He couldn’t have Areum complaining about this all evening, and she could be a pain in the ass if she wanted to.

“What do you want in exchange for the beach house this weekend?” Hanbin asked her, level. “Let’s negotiate.”

Areum studied him. She had a remarkably clever air to her, and Hanbin knew she could outsmart him, but she was also an ordinary schoolgirl, and Hanbin liked to think he had some more leverage. If she asked for some sunbaenim’s autograph he would grovel to get it, he didn’t care. He needed that house. “First,” she started. “You’ll let me sit next to your boyfriend at dinner.” Nonsense. Her place at the kitchen table had always been on the opposite side to the guest place. Their dad sat at the head of the table, which left Areum and their mother on one side and the empty place on the other.

“Why?” Hanbin asked.

“Just because I have mom’s permission to go to the beach house and you’re begging me to give it to you,” she said. The bitch. What did they give high school girls these days?

Hanbin rolled his eyes. “Okay,” he said. “No need to rub it in, though.”

She smiled, her round face lighting up with it. “Then,” oh god. “For my birthday, I will get to spend a day with you and him, and some of your group friends too. I want to brag about it. I have a half-famous brother and I never spend time with him, it sucks. And you’ll pay for everything, and you’ll, like, take me around your company. Like a *bring your sister to work* day, okay?” Seokjae would kill him. But, anyway, it was an inevitability at this point.

“Okay,” he said. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to have Hao be free the same day, but we’ll try.”

She smiled her usual smug smile again. “One more thing,” Hanbin should have put a limit to her. “If my friends won’t come to the beach because of you and your sexy times, then you’re going to have to make it up to them too.” Oh no. Hanbin hated his sister. “The fansign you have next week. Five tickets.”

“They’re sold out,” he tried. “It’s a small event, I can’t sneak in five people like that.”

Areum shrugged. “Guess I’m going to the seaside then!” She made to get up, her school uniform skirt all ruffled up on top of a pair of sweatpants. Why she hadn’t changed out of it yet was a mystery to Hanbin.

“Wait,” he called to her. “Let me make a phone call?” Her expression didn’t bode well. Hanbin knew he’d come across as desperate, and this would be used against him at some moment or other. He was giving this girl too much power. “But, Areum-ah,” he was already composing his manager’s phone number. “I’ll have you sign on this, you aren’t allowed to change the terms. If I get the tickets, then that’s it and you’re not bringing it up ever again.”

She made a face. “You’re no fun,” she said. And she sat back down, waiting for Hanbin to be done with his call.

Hao sat on Areum’s side at dinner. At least, Hanbin got to sit opposite him. His mother didn’t ask what the terms of the exchange had been, she just hit the both of them on their nape (*ow*) and then she recruited them to help around the kitchen, something they were already supposed to be doing, but they’d wasted time arguing with each other like they were still children, she made sure to point out. When Hao rang the bell the whole family was changed into better clothes and the conflict between Hanbin and his sister looked solved. If Areum behaved. Hao had driven, on his own. Hanbin was so incredibly proud of him, he repeated this information to every one of his family members individually,

until his dad told him that he was monopolizing the conversation and not letting Hao himself speak. Hao had brought a bottle of wine for Hanbin's parents, and a different present for Areum.

"You shouldn't have bothered," Hanbin whispered to him, as he took his jacket and showed him the dining area. "She's a bad person today."

Hao elbowed him lightly. "I want them to like me," he whispered back. Hanbin's nerves had been on edge all day because of this. Not that he believed that his family wouldn't like Hao, but this was still the first time they actually met him. "So they can let me date you," Hao added, in a joking lilt. Hanbin's heart rate increased. There was no chance he would break up with Hao, not even if all the authorities in the world told him to. It would still be nice if his family welcomed him easily. Which would happen, he was sure.

Areum materialized out of her room with a pretty smile and a prettier outfit. "Oh," she started. "Oppa, won't you introduce us?" Hanbin didn't miss Hao's amused smile.

"So, Bin's told us you're going to finish recording a new album next week," his father had been asking Hao a lot of questions over the course of the dinner, while his mother had just been refilling his plate non-stop. Areum had only replied to the questions she had been asked and she was also visibly embarrassed.

"Oh, well," Hao looked at Hanbin before turning back to his father. "We're going to re-record some bits, minor adjustments," he explained. He threw another look at Hanbin. "We're holding a concert in a few months," Hao went on. Hanbin smiled at him, and he nodded. "My parents won't be able to come, so I was wondering if I could invite Areum and a couple of her friends to come."

Areum lit up. She looked, incredulous, to him and to Hanbin and then to their mom. "Can I go?" She asked, her eyes round. Then she moved back to look at Hao again. "But you're being too nice to me, Hao-ssi. You already got me that comic book, you didn't have to go all this way with the tickets, too." She was so red in her face. Hanbin fought to hide his laughter. He took a sip of water.

"You can go," his mom said to his sister. "But your brother's told you how it works now, so don't go around parading that you got the tickets for free." Areum nodded.

"Oppa, are you going too?" Areum looked a bit too hopeful. Hanbin shared a glance with Hao.

"Sure, if I get a day off I'll come with you," he said. He wouldn't get the day off. Hao was smiling at him, however. "Thank Hao properly," he stage-whispered towards his sister. They ate a lot, and then Hao was shoved out of the kitchen, even though he wanted to help with the dishes, and Hanbin was sent to the living room with him, while his parents and his sister tidied up.

"You're spoiling her," Hanbin said, and he took Hao's hand to let him sit on the couch. Hao had a weird look in his eyes, a bit too emotional. Too overwhelmed.

"Your parents are amazing," he said, after a while. Hanbin couldn't deny this. He'd been lucky, in terms of family. "I think our mothers could be friends, don't you?" Hanbin couldn't find any word for a few seconds. Hao was always saying the most breathtaking shit without a care, as if it was completely normal for him to know that he and Hanbin were actually building a life together and it didn't send him out of his mind to think that they'd known each other for such a short time and they were already so sure of their future. Hanbin was sure, too. He was just in awe of Hao's confidence in it. "It'd be easier if my mom actually spoke Korean," Hao reasoned. "But--"

"Hao," Hanbin shut him up.

"What is it?" Hao smiled. "Why are you looking at me like that?" Hanbin had no idea what his face was doing.

"Thank you." Hao frowned a bit. "For coming tonight, for being there all the time. For loving me." Hao took a sharp breath. They were skirting around the subject, these days. But it had been almost a month and a half since that first night at the beach house, and Hanbin couldn't bring himself to keep it in much longer.

"Shut up," Hao said, with no strength at all. "I'm doing all that for entirely selfish reasons," he lied. Hanbin laughed, and Hao's ears got redder, also because Hanbin's family re-emerged from the kitchen. Hao moved away from him, sitting further apart from him on the couch. Hanbin's mother threw him an amused glance.

Hanbin's father imprisoned Hao in a conversation about the Korean school system, for some unknown reasons. Hanbin tried to save him countless times, but, in the end, he was whisked away from his mother. "Son," she started, as soon as she closed the door behind her. She also pushed a dessert plate in Hanbin's hands. "I won't make it dramatic," not his mom's style, after all. "But, at first, I was skeptical with the way you were putting yourself out there for this boy. All the hate the two of you got. You know we've always loved you the way you are, but it's hard for a mother to

witness such ugly nonsense said about her son. Anyway,” Hanbin was a bit dumbfounded. “Meeting him, I’m really happy you’ve brought Hao into our family.” Hanbin felt his eyes prickle. He blinked. “He’s good to you, but he’s already good to us, too. I know you don’t have an easy life right now, which is why I wish you and him a long, long life together.” Hanbin set the dessert plate down on the kitchen table. He hugged his mom. She patted his back and the back of his head, and disentangled herself quite quickly. “Save him from your dad’s talking,” she whispered. And she pushed him towards the door. He picked up the plate, with the other hand he wiped his tears.

“Oh, Binnie,” his dad welcomed him back. “You have no idea how smart your boyfriend is,” why would Hanbin have *no* idea? He sighed. And he sat down as close to Hao as he could, because at this point no one cared anymore. Hao put a hand over his knee, as he kept talking to his father, and that was it.

Hanbin walked Hao to his car. Hao kissed him goodnight in a corner where the streetlamps didn’t reach them, and Hanbin promised him that he would pick him up on time the following day — now that he had traded the access to the beach house with his sister. Hao kissed him again, and Hanbin kept him from getting away, when he decided to, kissing Hao even more. Hao smiled into it, and Hanbin’s heart was exploding. Hao broke it before they both reached the point where they couldn’t stop anymore. Hanbin hugged him a while longer, just because he could, and then he finally let him get inside the car he’d borrowed from his company. He watched as Hao drove away, and then he walked back to his house.

His parents had gone to bed a good half-hour before, and the flat was quiet now. “Yo,” Areum almost caused him a heart-attack. She was leaning against the door to her room, her purple pajama on. “I’m sorry I bullied you earlier,” she said.

Hanbin sighed, and he followed her inside her room. “It’s okay,” he told her. “I forced you to alter your plans with your friends at the last minute. I deserved some bullying.”

She laughed quietly. She looked like she wanted to say something. He waited. “I know I’m younger than you,” she sounded serious. “And I know that we rarely hang out. But I’d like to talk to you more often, so I’ll be nosier, going on.” Hanbin let out a sudden laugh. He didn’t expect this to go this way. “I realized that I had no idea about how disgustingly in love you are with Hao oppa,” she said. “Like, yeah. I knew you were dating him, and I knew you fought your boss and everything. And that you had a sort of breakdown about that, but I didn’t know that you don’t even call him *hyung*, I didn’t know that you two make a point of having a meal together every three days, I didn’t know that you’re getting a Chinese language certificate. What was worse, though, was that I didn’t know the things I was supposed to know, but *he* did. He knew what your favorite food is, and what presents you’d like for Christmas, and he knew that you are hot at night, while I felt so stupid to suggest that you bought thicker sleepwear.” Hanbin smiled at her, mouthing to her that it didn’t matter. “I know I can’t enter in the competition about being obsessed with you, ‘cause he’d win. But I realized that I could do better. Can we please talk more, oppa?”

Hanbin punched her lightly on her shoulder. “Of course,” he said. “Do you want the full story of how he and I started dating? The comprehensive version we’ll never tell anyone?”

Areum’s eyes shone in the dark. “Mom doesn’t know the real story?”

“Oh no, very few, selected, people do.”

Hao believed in his cooking skills more than anyone else did. He could cook, of course he could. And the fact that others didn’t enjoy his creations but preferred the more traditional tastes of boring, regular, recipes was only a testimony to the fact that there was an element of genius to his dishes. Hanbin wasn’t really saying anything, to his credit. He was watching him, from his spot next to the fridge and he wasn’t saying anything. Maybe it should be worrying Hao that he wasn’t saying anything. Or he was possibly just listening to Hao yapping about the food he was making and the spin he was giving it. “You alright?” He ended up asking, because Hanbin was being too quiet. He wasn’t even reacting to the jokes Hao was making.

“Yeah,” he didn’t sound convinced. Hao met his eyes. “Just,” Hanbin went on. “Are you sure you’ve done this before?”

“Of course I have!” Didn’t he trust him? Was he actually thinking Hao would let him eat something horrible? “And I’ve been told it was good, too.”

“By a real person?” Oh, he wanted to die. He’d driven Hao to the beach house and all, just to be killed by Hao.

Okay, it was just good to know. “By someone who was okay with not lying to you?”

“You’re taking some risks, Sung Hanbin,” he warned him. Hanbin laughed, finally. Hao had developed a problem with his laughter. If he didn’t hear it often enough, he would wither. He was sure of it. “How dare you imply that my food sucks?”

“I’m not implying it sucks,” Hanbin sounded defensive now. “I’m just saying, are you sure you had it tested by an apt reviewer?” Hao might be in love with him, but he wouldn’t spare him. Well. No. He *might* spare him. But only because Hanbin was already smiling and his eyes were turning into tight crescents and he was the single person Hao couldn’t live without. Hao rolled his eyes. Love was a weakness.

“Be careful what you say when you eat it,” he told Hanbin. “The rest of our weekend might depend on it.”

“Ooh,” Hanbin shot back, mockingly scared. Hao threw him an unimpressed stare. Hanbin let out a sharp laugh. “You know that I was wondering. If we go to that beach I told you about, the one where no one ever goes because it’s too much work. I’d like to go there, by the way. Anyway, hypothetically speaking, are we going to post photos of this? Like, separately?”

Hao fought against the impulse to leave their lunch on the stove, grab Hanbin’s sweater and pull him into a kiss. But there was time for that, too. A whole weekend. Two whole days. It was as best as they would get for a long time, and Hao wanted to savor all the nuances of this. They’d done the shopping together, earlier. Hao had insisted on it. They’d entered an old-looking mini-mart just outside town, populated with ads from ten years ago or so, and they’d prayed that the workers were out of touch with entertainment news. It was a good thing neither of them had bright hair colors right now, and it was amazing how no one bat an eye when they walked to the checkout with no face masks, hats or anything. The power of boring clothes and no make-up, Hanbin would comment later. The power of the only employee being a woman in her seventies, Hao would reply, but he would still be high on the feeling of normalcy. The farther they would run from home, the more they would feel like this, he thought. It wasn’t even a matter of popularity, if he was fair. He knew they still weren’t the kind of famous that gets stopped in the middle of the street. It was more an issue of their bosses still being angry at them for doing whatever they wanted, it was an issue of Hanbin wanting to play by the rules — as much as they could — and not getting caught at all. “We can’t post at the same time, now,” he replied. “People are still too used to us, they’d pick it up immediately.”

Hanbin nodded. “What if I set up a private profile,” Hanbin said. Hao saw him get closer to him, and he had to hold up a hand to stop him from closing the distance between them. Again, they would have time later.

“Yeah, so it’ll get found out and you’ll have another scandal,” he replied.

“It’s not *another* if it’s still with you,” Hanbin pointed out. Hao laughed, low and quiet and happy. He stirred the vegetables in the pan once again. Hanbin stepped back, with a disappointed sigh. “How long until it’s ready?”

“Jesus above, Hanbin,” Hao exclaimed. “You’re not this impatient, usually.”

Hanbin had the decency to look a bit taken aback. “I’m hungry,” he said. And he said it with such striking honesty that Hao found himself speechless. Hao was here thinking about the way he would move across the world for a domestic life like this, with Hanbin and boring Saturdays spent cooking and lazily kissing on couches, on beaches, behind corners. Hao was here, thinking that he’d give up everything if he could just have Hanbin with him, and Hanbin was thinking about *food* ? Food and online photos of them being so openly, vulnerably, in love. Hao’s head spun a bit.

“Set the table, then,” he told him. He hoped Hanbin knew that this meant more than that. Hanbin threw him a smile. Hao smiled back. They must look stupid from an outsider’s point of view, they were just bickering and looking at each other with the softest air ever. Hao disliked the idea of being considered stupid, but if that was the price to pay for the way he was feeling — happy, mainly, and warm, and hopeful, and lucky — then he would take it.

The beach Hanbin had talked about required them to walk through what Hao could only describe as impervious vegetation. Hanbin was folded in two, in laughter. “It’s just a few bushes,” he was trying to say, but he was crying in between words because, evidently, Hao’s indignation was funny to him. The sand had breached inside Hao’s shoes, and the bushes grazed his legs as they walked towards the beach, and Hao was used to more comfortable settings but the scenery was beautiful and he had to stop in his tracks to take in the whole of the landscape, the golden hue of the sand, the bright blue of the water. “It’s a bit unfair,” Hao said, after a while. Hanbin threw him a curious look. “How beautiful the simplest places can be. I was thinking just earlier how we would travel the world and see all its marvels, and now I find myself breathless just because of the Yellow Sea.” Hanbin was close to him, and had been walking close to him all this while. Hao took his hand, somewhat automatically. Hanbin twined their fingers together. Hao kept silent, and he kept looking at the hundreds of sparks of the sun playing with the water.

They walked along the beach for what felt like forever, and the sun took the longest time to set, because summer

wasn't far behind them, yet. Hao gave in to his desire to kiss Hanbin too many times, to the point that Hanbin joked that he would have to abandon him there. Hao half ran after him, and then he decided he still had some dignity left so he stopped. Hanbin told him a story about how he used to come to this beach with other kids when he was eight or nine, and they would make their way through the jungle ("A-ha, so you admit it!" "I was *nine*, Hao.") with sticks and make-believe scythes and sabres ("We played explorers." "And what did you find?" "Eldorado, once. Eden, another time. Atlantis, most times."). He told him that, once, they ran into someone's older brother kissing a girl here, but it didn't stop them from going there to play other times, ("Where are these boys now?" "No idea, it was such a long time ago") and then their mothers all found out where they disappeared for whole afternoons and grounded all of them, with no chance of appealing ("That's a horrible ending to this story." "It's a childhood story, they all end with either grounding or lost friendships." "What the hell, Hanbin"). Hanbin did take pictures, after all. And Hao made sure that at least half of those were selfies of the two of them. Then he forced Hanbin to send them to him immediately, and then it took them a *lot* of time to go back to the car, because they hadn't stopped walking for, like, two hours. Maybe Hanbin's mother had had her reasons to stop her nine-year old son from coming to such a magnetic place.

"Had you ever gone back there since you grew up?" Hao asked, on the drive back home. They'd ordered delivery pizza for dinner. Hao couldn't wait, now it was him who was famished.

"Yeah," Hanbin said, changing the gear into first at a stop sign. "But always on my own," he added. "It's always been my favorite place to go and clear my mind."

Hao thought about what he could say to that. "I didn't steal it from you, did I?" He asked, because he still had very little idea how to deal with the thought that he was going to do his best to spend his entire life with this boy.

"Don't be silly," Hanbin turned to him for a quick second. "I brought you there on purpose. Hao, I want you to know everything," he added.

Hao closed his eyes for a second. "I'm in love with you," he said, and his hands were cold and sweaty. "And I know that you know that, but I had to say it. I love you." Hanbin's eyes went rounder. His hands on the wheel paler. He started laughing.

"While I'm driving?" Was the first thing he said. Hao shrugged into his sweater. "What if I drove us into a wall because you'd said that?" Hanbin was keeping his speed regular and smooth. It sounded like bullshit. "I love you, too," he finally said. Hearing it, though he knew, was enough to send Hao's heartbeat crazy. "I know you wanted to hear me say it."

"Brat," Hao said, and he was smiling too hard.

"Poor princess," Hanbin rebuked. And then, as if he hadn't made Hao's breath stop, he went on with, "What are our plans for tomorrow? Do you want to go somewhere? Stay in? I'd like to get some fresh air, to be honest. But I also think we should sleep in a bit—"

"Let's rent bikes," Hao said, and he knew he would regret the suggestion.

Two hours later, Hao found himself pressing Hanbin against the front door, Hanbin having come back from bringing out the garbage. Hanbin was laughing, as Hao kissed him, and he was holding Hao's hips almost lazily. Hao pressed further into him, making him gasp, and then Hanbin half moaned into his mouth and it was as if Hao had never known anything else in his life, aside from the sheer want to have Hanbin. He licked into his mouth, he let his weight fall against him, and he also forced his legs apart with his own. Hanbin's hips jerked against Hao's. Hao brought one of his hands to his thigh, Hanbin shivered, noticeably. Hao pulled him away from the door and they stumbled onto the couch, Hao on top of him, Hanbin half sprawled against the cushions. There were so many things Hao wanted to do. He pushed Hanbin's sweater — already zipped open, already showing the tank top beneath it — away from his shoulders. He kissed his skin there, warm and smelling like the orange scented body wash that they'd both used earlier. Hanbin's hand found his waist again. Hao's mouth ran along his collarbone, and he stopped right where the first inked spots emerged. Hanbin's soft sigh encouraged him to kiss him right there, too. Hanbin was alternating between sighs and gasps and louder sobs as Hao kissed every centimeter of skin he could get his mouth on. Thank god Hanbin loved low-collared clothes. He grazed his teeth along the muscle on his chest, and then Hanbin was whining and begging him to keep doing that and Hao had to move away in order to help him take off his top so that he could have his way. Hanbin's body was incredible, Hao loved everything about it, he loved touching it, and kissing it, and he loved the way Hanbin called his name, over and over, while Hao licked and bit at his nipple. Hanbin was so vocal, but so quiet, too, in his secret code of breaths and sighs and softly whispered syllables. Hao wanted to drink all these tiny sounds and to never forget them and to make Hanbin lose his mind and to— "Please," Hanbin sobbed. "Please fuck me tonight," he sounded broken. Hao raised his gaze to look at him and his eyes were shiny, his hair a mess, his cheeks burning up,

bright pink.

“Anything,” Hao heard himself say. “Anything you want.” Hanbin nodded at that, a bit uncoordinated. Hao kissed his stomach again. Hanbin’s eyes fluttered closed. Hanbin brought his hand up to caress his face, his hair. Hao smiled lightly, Hanbin adored him so much, it was so strange to feel so loved, and so deeply, and so honestly. “Can you manage to get to the bed?”

Hanbin laughed quietly underneath him. “That might be a good idea,” Hanbin replied, and they both pushed themselves up, unsteady, unsure, still with their hands tangled over each other’s bodies, destined to trip over something in the short distance between one room and the other. Hanbin had a look in his eyes Hao would never forget. He prayed he could get to see it forever, that it would never die out. He would die if Hanbin didn’t love him like that forever. Hao pushed him against the mattress, Hanbin scrambled to get rid of his own pants, while Hao took off his clothes as well. “My bag,” Hanbin said, almost as an afterthought. “The side pocket.” Hao, in only his underwear, opened the duffel bag Hanbin had traveled with. He followed his instructions. Oh, Hanbin. He tossed both the lube and the condoms on the bed. Then he moved to kiss Hanbin again. Hanbin met him halfway, perched on his elbows, eager and keen and sincere. Hao guided him to lie down again, not so gracefully. Their inexperience kept showing in bumped noses and knees and elbows they didn’t really know where to fit. And Hao knew he had none of the delicate ways Hanbin had with him, when their roles were reversed, because he was pushing his knees open with no refinement and he was smearing the lubricant along his fingers in haste, but Hanbin was staring at him with his eyes almost full of wonder and Hao just wanted to grant his wish and make him feel good and full and happy and loved. “Tell me how you like it,” he said, and he helped Hanbin adjust into a better position for Hao to touch him.

Hanbin didn’t really answer, he let out a whiny groan. Hao stroked his dick once. Hanbin inhaled with a rattle. “Fuck,” he swore. Hao did it again, with more pressure. He was heavy and hot in his hand and if he hadn’t already promised something else he would take him into his mouth instantly. “Stretch me,” Hanbin breathed out. Hao poured more lube on his fingers. It dripped down along his wrist. He’d never done this to anyone other than himself, he hoped he wouldn’t hurt Hanbin.

“Tell me if I get it wrong,” he said in a hushed whisper, and, with his other hand rubbing circles on Hanbin’s hip, he pushed in. Hanbin sucked in a breath, a half curse. Hao took his time, easing his way into him with care, but his self-control was slipping away fast because Hanbin was taking his fingers extremely well and the squelch of it all was enough to have Hao pick up a merciless speed as he scissored his fingers up and down. Hanbin was panting, his eyes shut tight and toes curling. Hao pushed deeper.

“Hao-ge,” Hanbin sobbed. Fuck, Hao moved his left hand to his own dick. “Gege,” Hanbin wanted him dead, it was a definite possibility. Hao shoved his hand violently back down, having taken it back just a second. Hanbin moaned loud. Louder than he’d had until now. “S good,” he assured Hao the second after. “So good.” Hao felt crazy.

“Should I keep doing it?” He asked, because he wasn’t able to think, because he needed Hanbin to tell him how to touch him, how to fuck him. Hanbin was breathing in sobs and he was gripping at the sheets in a desperate way.

“No,” Hanbin managed to say. “Fuck me,” he said, once again. “Like,” he didn’t need to clarify. Hao got him. He adjusted them, and he didn’t know where Hanbin found the dexterity to open up the condom and slide it on Hao, but he did it with the utmost reverence. Hanbin spread out for him without breaking eye contact, and Hao’s stomach tightened. Hanbin blinked quickly. “You’re so beautiful,” he breathed out.

Hao kissed his mouth, hotly, untidy. He moved back, held his hips and finally pushed inside of him. “You’re prettier,” he muttered. Hanbin sighed. God, was he tight. Hao could understand why people went insane over this feeling. He tried not to move too rashly. He needed to get used to the sensation, and Hanbin too, he guessed. Hanbin squirmed a bit, maybe it was too much- “Is it-”

“Good,” Hanbin cut him off. He met Hao’s eyes, his eyes were so dark it made Hao’s heart skip a beat. “You can,” he stopped mid-sentence, his breath catching, “...more.” Hao’s own breath was unsteady as he complied, inch by inch by inch. He exhaled, his face half buried against Hanbin’s chest. “Ah,” Hanbin exclaimed, a surprisingly clear sigh. Hao moved slowly, he forced himself to. He tried to keep it calm, the rhythm at which he was rolling his hips into Hanbin, at which he hit him right where it mattered. It was Hanbin who asked him to go faster, and deeper, and the way he was shameless right now, shameless in the things he wanted, shameless in the way he listened to his body’s desires, was amazing. Hanbin, who was always worried about what others thought of him. Hanbin, who tried to accommodate everyone’s wishes and expectations of him. Hanbin, who was whining under him, and wrapping one leg over Hao’s back to be fucked even better, and who was whispering Hao’s name in broken syllables because he was being taken care of like he deserved to. Hao was going to come. The drag was too good, the heat, the tightness, everything. How Hanbin was grasping at his shoulders. Too much. All of that: too much. Hao pressed into him again and again and he

lost his rhythm, and Hanbin made up for it by rocking his hips into him on his own and Hao came, and Hanbin, insane, beautiful Hanbin, flipped them over. He was on top of Hao, now, gloriously flushed and drenched in sweat, as he rode Hao, spent as he was, until he, too, was coming. He let himself fall down next to Hao, cramped in the single bed pressed against the wall. "Wow," Hanbin exhaled.

Hao ran a hand through his hair, pushing it away from his forehead. "Don't be so smug," he told him.

Hanbin's smile only grew wider. "I can't believe how lucky I am to have you," Hanbin said, strikingly honest. "I can't believe I get to spend my whole life with you."

"Now, who said we'll spend it all together," Hao joked.

"Well, I did," Hanbin didn't miss a beat. "Just now. And you can't back down," he didn't even seem fazed by Hao's comeback. Hao must have looked smitten *and* fucked out. Well.

"Oh, fuck," he continued to joke. "What a disaster," he added. And then, "I love you so much, Hanbin-ah."

"Yeah," Hanbin echoed. "I love you *too* much."

The drive back was fun, because Hao made a point to change songs every two minutes and sing them all at the top of his lungs, making it clear, once again, that his entire playlist barely contained any male-gendered artists. Hanbin kept laughing, so hard that he hardly managed to sing along, despite Hao's insistence he did so. It was too quick, going back to the city. Hanbin wondered if it would be insane to miss an exit on purpose, just to prolong their time together. He didn't, and he drove them right under Hao's building. Hao didn't open his door, he didn't unbuckle. He just stared at Hanbin, from his passenger seat, with his eyes happy and sad at once. Hanbin killed the engine. "Next time," Hao said, his voice serious. "Next time we get a weekend off, we should go somewhere together."

Hanbin blinked. "Where do you want to go?" Hao laughed, a thin, stretched thing. Hanbin moved his hand from the handbrake to his knee. "Christmas isn't that far away," Hanbin pointed out. "We won't surely be invited to perform, we're not *that* famous for Christmas shows." Hao had to agree, a wider smile on his face. "So. You know, not that far. We should plan something."

Hao leaned back against his seat, not hinting at leaving whatsoever. "Okay," he said. "But there's two months and a half until Christmas." Clingy, he was. Hanbin patted his knee. "In which I have a comeback scheduled, and you have a shit ton of solo activities, and we all have to film so many things for the holidays and-"

"And we'll still meet as usual," Hanbin stopped him. Hao nodded, and he suddenly moved towards Hanbin, holding himself just a breath away from his face. Hanbin closed the distance, kissing him. It wasn't over quickly, like he'd thought. Hao grabbed his face and kissed him deeper, half desperate. Hanbin was breathless. "Hey," he whispered, parting. Hao's eyes were somewhat shiny. "Hey, we're in the same city, we're one call away from each other," Hanbin ran a thumb along his jaw. He understood what Hao felt. He, too, missed him whenever they were apart. He, too, felt like spending two whole days together made it harder to go back to seeing each other twice a week (if they were lucky).

"I feel stupid," Hao scoffed. Hanbin laughed, and he left another shallow kiss on the corner of Hao's mouth. "And I'm not usually stupid," Hao stated. Which was very true. "So I'll act like the clever man I am," Hanbin nodded. "And I'll say goodbye to you, I'll grab my bag and go back to my room, and I'll go back to work and all. And in three days I'll see you and I'll be normal about it." A good plan. Hanbin nodded, again. Hao smiled a bit, his eyes going softer. He stole Hanbin's breath by kissing him again, sweet, slow and soft. "Thanks for driving, Bin," he said. And, "And thanks for these two days."

Hanbin didn't pull him back for another kiss. Not that he didn't want to, but one of them had to stop. "I'll send you the photos later," he said. "And I'll text you." Hao rolled his eyes. He hastily got out of the car, retrieved his bag from the back seat and leaned back in to stare at Hanbin. "Bye?" Hanbin wasn't actually sure.

"Just go," Hao sounded almost impatient. Hanbin laughed. "I can't stand that you have to go," Hao furiously closed the passenger side's door, almost slamming it shut. Hanbin turned the engine back on. "Text me when you're home," Hao's final words, loud in the evening air. Hanbin was laughing by himself.

"Hyung!" Gunwook basically pounced on him as soon as he went through the door. "Hyung, *hyung* !" He was bouncing on his feet and his eyes were so full of gleam. Hanbin toed his shoes off, dropping his duffel bag to the floor with no elegance. Gunwook hugged him, not unlike a big dog waiting for his human to come back home. "Hyung, ask me what's up!"

Hanbin burst out in laughter, pushing through to the living room with that giant puppy still wrapped around him. “What’s up, Gunwook-ah?” He dutifully asked.

“I got casted in a drama!” He immediately said, and his smile was bright and wide and Hanbin was gaping and laughing and slapping him on his arms in excitement. “I still have to do a screen test but they basically said they thought of me first and that I shouldn’t even audition, I’ll just do the screen test and I don’t even know if I’m good at that but isn’t it amazing all the same?”

“It’s incredible,” Hanbin’s chest felt like it might explode from all the happiness. “Congratulations!” And “What’s the drama about, what’s the character? When will you film? Do you know some of the other actors already?”

Gunwook swayed them from one side to the other, in a display of childish joy. “It’s a school drama, nothing particularly innovative, *but* my character looks fun, he’s a good student with a secret-”

“And what’s the secret?” Hanbin was finally released. Gunwook stepped back but he didn’t let go of Hanbin’s hands.

“He’s a sort of secret agent, as far as I understand?” Hanbin was gaping. Full-on gaping.

“I *love* it,” he said. “God, I love it. I can’t wait to see you in it, I love the concept, I love *you* in this concept, fuck, my phone,” he trailed off. His phone was vibrating in his back pocket. He picked up. “Sorry, yes, I reached home, I was ambushed by Gunwookie who had the best news ever,” he didn’t even let Hao speak. “He’s been casted in a super cool drama, he’s telling me about it, let me call you back later, I love you. Bye.”

Gunwook was staring at him with his mouth in the shape of a very round *O*. “Give him my congratulations!” Hao managed to push out before Hanbin had even finished speaking. Then it was Hao who actually hung up, which allowed Hanbin to go back to the main focus.

“I was saying that I love the whole-”

“You dismissed Hao hyung like that? Your literal boyfriend? The man you *love* ?” Gunwook sounded a bit distressed.

“Yeah, because you’ve clearly been waiting for me to be back to talk to me about this, and it’s an important thing, and I’ve spent the whole weekend away and it looks like you were excited to talk to me, also Hao sends his congrats via this super short call.” Gunwook might not see it, but Hanbin loved him, too. He loved all of them. And it was obviously a different kind of love from the one that bound him to Hao, but it wasn’t weaker.

Gunwook was hugging him again. “Hyung,” he whined. “I couldn’t wait to tell you but I didn’t want to disturb you while you were out, *and* it’d be much better if I *told* you about it and not *texted*, you know? And promise you won’t tell Jiwoong hyung,” he dropped his voice to a loud whisper, “but you’re my favorite hyung here.”

Hanbin laughed. “All four of us are older than you, but I only have to keep it from Jiwoong. Okay,” he replied. “I’m proud of you for this drama thing,” he also said. “And I want to know everything about it. And I’ll come to visit you when you start filming, on the set. And maybe we’ll send a coffee truck, too, because you’re our favorite maknae.”

“I’m the only-” Gunwook tried to say. Hanbin shushed him and he pulled back from the hug. He grabbed his bag, and he grabbed Gunwook’s wrist, and he forced him to sit on his bed as he was unpacking his clothes, just so Gunwook could yap some more about his drama and about how they called him on the phone to talk to him about it, and about how they’d sent him a ton of reading material and he’d already started on it. Hanbin kept asking questions, and Gunwook kept replying in full detail, and, at a certain point Jiwoong joined them so Gunwook had to start over but Hanbin was happy nonetheless, even if he had to hear the story from the beginning again.

hanbinsung

> *sorry about earlier*
> *my son needed me a bit*

hao ♥

> *i know, i know*
> *you still could have texted after parking the car but okay*
> *tell me about his drama, i’m curious!*

hanbinsung

> *can i call you?*
> *it’s quicker than texting all of it*

hao ♡

> give me 5, i was talking to seungie
> maybe 10, it looks like it'll take a bit sorry babe

hanbinsung

> no worriessss
> call me whenever you're done

hao ♡

> thxxxx

hanbinsung

> why are you this cringe when you want oh god

Slowly, patiently and with a few bumps in the road, Hanbin had found a therapist that was available to see him. The first one he'd visited after the company counselor hadn't been the right fit, as was evident from the fact that he didn't get a second appointment. The second one was much better. It was a woman in her sixties and she'd agreed to see him too early in the morning for every other person, and she hadn't said anything at all for the first thirty minutes of the first session, except from: why are you here today, Hanbin-ssi? Hanbin had thought he wouldn't know what to say. He'd practiced it in his head on the way over, multiple times. *I've had a bad few weeks and the people around me got worried*, or *I'm under pressure at work and I need to find some balance back*. In the end, it hadn't been either of those things. "You're the third mental health professional I've visited in the last month," he'd said. "I was referred to my company's specialist after a very bad episode of insomnia, but he couldn't quite help me. So I'm here," she was silent. "I work as an idol," he'd said, after a few seconds in which he'd waited for her to say something. "The insomnia's resolved, anyway," he felt a bit stupid, because he kind of expected her to take the reins of the conversation. But she was silent. "Anyway, insomnia wasn't the problem itself, clearly. So it felt like I shouldn't stop looking for a therapist, because I could use another point of view." By then, he'd decided he would go on monologuing. "When I couldn't sleep there was a gigantic unsolved issue in my life, but now I kind of fixed it. Which is why I think that I'm able to sleep again, but, as I was saying, I don't think that was the only thing that needed addressing. Like, when I was fixing the unsolved issue, the other person involved told me that I don't have to be perfect all the time, but I kinda feel like I *need* to be perfect twenty-four seven or people won't like me." When the doctor spoke again, he'd told her about the failure in the practice room, he'd told her about how he'd felt like he was letting down the rest of his group.

"Hanbin-ssi," the doctor's voice was warm. She had round glasses and her roots were gray. "Would you draw me a map of the people in your life? I'm getting a bit lost." Hanbin mentioned his family, the rest of 5stars, their managers, Ji Ara. "Who was the person you had to resolve that issue with?"

Hanbin was looking at his nails. "Hao," he said. "He's not in my group, he's an idol, too, though. We, huh," would it ever get easier? "We worked together for a thing and-"

"A friend, then?" And this was a way out. But Hanbin wasn't spending all this company money to be a coward.

"No," he said. He raised his eyes, the doctor's face was completely neutral, if welcoming. "He and I are dating. I'm gay. Which, honestly, I thought I'd accepted as a fact, but maybe it's not quite like that, now that it's become relevant for the whole world, apparently."

"How is that relevant for anyone other than you and your boyfriend?" The therapist said and, oh, was she in for a ride. In the end, Hanbin would wonder if he'd enraptured her with the crazy tale of his last year, or if she was just a normal, balanced, doctor who didn't need the whole drama to be convinced to accept a new patient. Be it as it may, Hanbin visited her every week, and she would ask him only a few questions, and he would talk and talk and say things he'd never known he'd been thinking. Unpacking the last few months alone would take a lifetime, but he was going to face this with his chin up.

"Does your therapist have recs for some colleague?" Taerae asked him, out of the blue, a random evening. They were cleaning dishes, and they were also waiting for Gunwook to receive the final phone call about his drama.

"I can ask," Hanbin replied, and he handed him a pan to dry. "Why?"

Taerae inhaled sharply. "Nothing macroscopic," he said. "I'm fine. But, you know, if I can be happier with

myself...”

Hanbin struggled to find words to reply with, for a while. “I’ll ask about that,” he settled on. And then, because he felt like it sucked as a reply. “You know that you can also talk to me, and that I’ll be here for you forever, and that I wouldn’t have made it this far without you, right?”

Taerae slapped him with the dish towel. “You would have quit if it wasn’t for me,” he said, but he was smiling. Hanbin rolled his eyes. “I know I can talk to you, Bin-ah,” Taerae put the pan in its place. “You’re my best friend, maybe.” *Maybe*. “But it’s just because meeting the other Hanbin is super hard with our schedules,” now Hanbin recognized the Taerae he knew. “So I had to fall back on the first Hanbin I could find.” Hanbin laughed. It was always insane to think about how the two of them had basically grown up together. Taerae had been the first trainee he’d made friends with. Taerae had always been by his side, with few nice words and a lot of snappy remarks, but he’d never left.

“Do you remember when they told us we’d both been picked for this group?” Hanbin asked. And he knew that Taerae remembered. It was such a strong memory, how could he forget?

Taerae sighed again. “Yeah, I told you we would disband in six months,” exactly. Always the optimist. “It’s almost been six years,” unbelievable.

“We made it, more or less,” Hanbin whispered. Taerae looked at him sideways.

“More or less, my ass,” he replied. “We’re doing three concerts here next month and we have as many scheduled for Japan in January and February. This is more than I would have expected to get.”

Hanbin elbowed him. “That’s because you’re the most negative person I know,” he pointed out.

5stars news @5starsupdated — 5h ago

Park Gunwook to star in drama “Secret Crush Secret Identity” to be released in 2024 with lead role.
Filming is reportedly starting this week.

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

PGW sent texts:

yooooo have you heard the news? i’m so happy!
lol
jiwoong hyung baked me a cake to celebrate

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

PGW sent texts:

even quanrui gyuvn and seungeon [from aw4ke] congratulated me lol
they called all together from the practice room, cuties
my brothers from another family they’re the best

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

PGW sent texts:

my other hyungs came back with sunglasses and stopped matthew hyung from getting an autograph from me
HAHAHAHAHAH
i love them !!

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

SM sent texts:

i was just acting like a fan!!!! his bodyguards are evil and they stopped me from getting the autograph i had been waiting for!!!! it’s unfair!

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 2h ago

SM sent texts and photos:

this guard here in particular! he's the worst.

[photo]

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 1h ago

SHB sent texts:

ya matthew!!! calling me the worst for protecting our baby boy like that!!!!
anyway, you all go congratulate gunwookie for his news! send him all the love!!

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — 1h ago

20231102 Hao posts on Bubble

[TRANS]

gunwookie called with the best news earlier and i wasn't in the room so i called him back later and he was being ambushed by fans and protected by bodyguards
his success grew quickly omg lol

[context: Park Gunwook from 5stars got cast in a drama and the Aw4ke members called him to congratulate him (Hao got who called whom wrong in his text), Hao was in another room then so he didn't talk to him. Hao called Gunwook later, and he witnessed the 5stars member playing pretend with Gunwook. According to Gunwook's own texts, Jiwoong, Hanbin and Taerae played as his bodyguards while Matthew tried to get his autograph.]

gunwook acting debut! @super5tarss — just now

they're,,,, they're all so silly??
i love all of them so much

gunwook acting debut! @super5tarss — just now

also why am i emotional bc aw4ke and 5stars are still tight??? like of course they'd be if hao and hanbin are still together but it always catches me by surprise to see all of them being so family coded like wdyam hao immediately called him back and he saw the whole playfight evolving??

gunwook acting debut! @super5tarss — just now

look at me writing "if they're still together" like i'm not fully convinced they're gonna get married to each other asap

gunwook acting debut! @super5tarss — just now

stop qrt me with "they've broken up, they haven't been posting" you don't have the psychic connection i have with them (it's called psychotic delusion, maybe)

Surprises weren't Hao's forte. He was vibrating with anticipation. He was imagining the face Gunwook would make when he realized they'd all gone to meet him at the end of his first day of filming. Quanrui was like him, and he, too, wasn't able to keep quiet next to him. Gyuvin had already elbowed both of them multiple times. The 5stars guys, instead, were all very serious, it looked a matter of life and death to them. It had been a whole week of discussions over group chats, peppered with *our son* this and *our baby* that, and Hao got that Gunwook was their youngest, but it was

really *that* serious to them. Hao felt like he'd underestimated this side of his friends until now. They sounded like they really thought of themselves as Gunwook's parental figures, which, realistically, wasn't the case. Hao supported their energy, however, and he was also beginning to understand why they felt like that, because seeing Gunwook all happy for his drama was the most endearing thing ever. He never stopped smiling and he looked like he would keep bouncing on his feet from happiness forever. It was a strong trigger of parental instincts, it was true.

"Any minute now," Matthew said, in a whisper. And, surely, the lights in the changing room were turned on no longer than a couple minutes later. Gunwook opened the door and they all started congratulating him so loudly that he jumped in place from the scare. There was a cameraman with him, and he was rolling, because AJEnt had decided that, of course, they'd have to make a vlog out of this, too. Hao did his best not to block the 5stars member on camera, but he knew he and the others would probably be edited out or blurred out.

"Guys," Gunwook's voice was teary. "Oh, guys," he'd grabbed Hanbin and Matthew and he was smothering them in an uncoordinated hug. "Oh, god."

"We brought a cake for you," Taerae said, holding it out for him, while Jiwoong held the knife. On the cake, it read *our baby bear's face will be on tv!* and Hao had been smiling about it for hours, since he'd seen it. Hanbin had sent him the photo as soon as they'd picked it up, and he'd never felt so happy about having him and his friends in his life. Hanbin brought with himself so much happiness and joy, not just by himself, but with the people he kept around too. It shouldn't be absurd that they matched his energy, in this regard, but Hao still found it something to feel grateful for.

"I didn't want to cry," Gunwook was full-on crying, with his four hyungs all cuddling him and patting him on the head or on the shoulders. Hao snapped a photo of them. Hanbin met his eyes. following the click sound. The smile he flashed Hao was blinding, and he had no doubt whatsoever that it was just for him. He felt his heart pick up speed. Looking at Hanbin was like running at full speed with the wind in your face, it made Hao feel alive and perfectly grounded in his body, in his soul. Hanbin looked away, back to Gunwook who was still wiping tears from his eyes, with a big smile on his face.

"Let's eat this cake," Hao said. "C'me on, Wookie. We've been waiting here with this cake's smell forever, we're hungry." Everyone laughed, and Gunwook shook free of his four mothers and he proceeded to cut the cake.

"How was the first day on set?" Seungeon asked, not three minutes later, as soon as everyone had their own plate. "How does it feel to act? Tell us something."

"Mmh," Gunwook was sitting on the floor, having left the two couches to them. "The director is super professional, she made me re-shoot everything a lot of times, but she says it's just because she wants to have options. I don't know, maybe I'm not this great actor... anyway the other actors are extra fun. I like them. I'll have you meet them later on, I think some of them are still here."

"Do you have a love interest in this series?" Quanrui asked. Hao turned to look at him, but it was a hard feat to perform. He was balancing himself half on top of the armrest and half on top of Hanbin. They were trying not to be glued to each other all the time, especially around cameras, as per their bosses' indications. But now the cameraman had disappeared to somewhere else, and Hanbin hadn't even waited for him to close the door behind his back before rejoining Hao's side. It was a form of gravity. No one even questioned it.

"Not really," Gunwook replied. "My character's not an average school boy anyway," he explained. Hao loved Gunwook's character already. "There's a love story between his two classmates, though."

"Don't spoil it for us already," Hao protested. "I want to watch it when it comes out."

"Then go to another room," Hanbin teased him. "Because I don't think we'll stop asking questions." Hao slapped his thigh. Hanbin's laughter reverberated across Hao too.

"Why don't you get a girlfriend, though?" Quanrui insisted. "Like, not you *you*, You, the character. Like, I get he's a spy or whatever, but why did they make him be without a love interest? How did they explain it to you?"

Hao sighed. They could go on like this all night long. Please let someone stop him. He tried meeting Gyuvin's eyes. "Because he's not really himself at school, he plays a part? And it would be too complex to deal with the plot of him falling for someone and then this person finding out he's under a secret identity and then having to deal with understanding who they'd really fallen in love with." But that would be an interesting plot, nonetheless, Hao thought. "Also, it's a sort of investigative drama, so the plot is more focused on that." Hao preferred romances, but he would watch this all the same. His boyfriend's son was in this, after all. Did that make Gunwook his adoptive son? God, why were they all so caught up in this delusion. Gunwook went on. "I was actually very happy I didn't have to have a love interest," what? Why? "I thought it would be much better if people could think of my character as possibly queer, too."

Hao looked at everyone's reactions. He examined them. Gunwook was saying this to a majority of queer people in the room. Hao felt a bit light-headed, as he realized that Gunwook had really grown up with only non-straight people around, basically. And he was choosing to bring his experience with him in his personal activities, in a career that might have been separated from his idol work until now. He was bringing his four older members with him in his character. "You're really playing him as-" Hanbin started asking, and it probably meant that they'd talked about this before.

"The director said it was fine," he replied. "They won't let me say much in the promo, but, you know. I know what I'm doing, you guys know it too." His eyes were shiny again. Hao couldn't let him start crying again.

"God, it looks like our whole career is just being the most honest queerbaiters ever," Hao commented. Gunwook laughed. Mission success! Hanbin's hand found Hao's. Hao ran his thumb along Hanbin's warm hand.

"Look at him," Taerae said, playfully acidic. "Capitalizing on our struggles," Hanbin's laugh was bright and Hao snorted too. "We raised a monster, I'm so proud of you, Gunwook-ah," he said, all in one breath.

Hao waited until all the other people had left the room. Only he, Taerae and Hanbin had stayed behind to clean up. Gunwook had led them to visit the set and meet some of the other people on the cast, and then they'd all started heading home. Taerae had felt bad for the state they'd left Gunwook's changing room in, so he'd tricked Hanbin into helping him. Hao, of course, had stayed, too. "Do you want to crash at mine?" Hao asked, and he was praying that Hanbin said yes. The few hours they spent together during their weeks were never enough. If Hanbin slept over, just once, just today. They would just sleep, Hao wasn't hoping for much more, just for the chance to fall asleep next to him, to wake up together.

"I should wake up early tomorrow," Hanbin said. And it wasn't a no.

"You can wake up when you want," Hao was practically begging him. "I'll wake up with you, I should go to the company too, if I'm honest."

Hanbin glanced at Taerae briefly. "I'll drive Taerae home," he was smiling. "And then I'll come back to your dorm." Hao thought it defied the purpose of sleeping at his, seeing that it was much closer to this set than Hanbin's dorm. But, whatever. He was still winning.

Hanbin always refused to punch the code in himself, so Hao opened the door for him. Then he pulled him to his room. Having him close was always intoxicating, the way Hanbin kissed him left him breathless and burning from the inside out. Hanbin touched him with such reverence, every single time, Hao wasn't ever getting used to it. His hands were everywhere, he wasn't breaking the kiss and Hao wanted him to never break away from him. Hanbin brought himself to sit on Hao's mattress, pulled him closer and peeled his sweater away from his stomach to kiss him there. He was holding Hao by his hips. His fingers were cold where they went to unclasp the button of his jeans. "Hanbin-" Hao laid his hands on his shoulders. Hanbin moved back just enough to look at him, his eyelashes fluttering on his cheeks. "Hanbin, it's late," he said, and it cost him a lot, because, genuinely, he wasn't in the habit of turning down sex with Hanbin at any moment. But they weren't going to get enough sleep, and they both had too many things to do the next day. They should step away from each other, they should have some control. Hao was going to have to deny himself something he really wanted, though. But it was for the best. It *was* late, and the following day they would have to be in their best condition. They should really just go to bed.

Hanbin let him go. "You're right," he said. "Let's get ready for bed," he was so stupidly pretty, Hao couldn't stand it.

"I mean," Hao heard himself say. "We could be quick," Hanbin laughed, his beautiful, breathtaking laugh. Oh, Hao was so fucked. Metaphorically, but maybe not for long.

"We could," Hanbin echoed him. "Hao, you can stop me, I don't want to-" No, he didn't want to impose, Hao knew. He knew Hanbin would never do anything out of pocket. He loved him for it. But Hao wanted him, too. Hao had no restraint when it came to him.

"Shut up," Hao said, with no bite. "Keep doing what you were going to do," he begged. "I changed my mind."

Hanbin looked at him. And, still looking at him, he pushed down Hao's pants with a confident tug. Hao gasped. Hanbin licked his own lips. Oh, fuck. Hao's legs wouldn't hold him standing. Ten minutes later, Hanbin was pushing him on top of the mattress, and he was kneeling between his legs and he wasn't letting up his rhythm whatsoever and Hao was coming down his throat with a muffled groan. Hanbin's eyes were a bit glossy and his lips completely red. Shit, what a sight. Hao pushed himself up, he took his chin in his hands. "Let me return the favor," he said. Hanbin nodded, and Hao crawled until he reached the end of his bed, and he pushed himself to the floor. Hanbin's legs fell

apart. Hao took his time, and damned be the few hours they'd get to sleep. He wanted to savor it. He dragged it out, also because Hanbin liked it slow, and he'd learnt it, he'd learnt how to read him, how to parse through the signals he gave under his hands and lips. He was in no rush. Hanbin trembled underneath his hands, he was breathing through his nose like it would help him not scream, and Hao was taking him as deep as he could, and he loved the feel, he loved the light burn of it.

"Fuck," Hanbin mouthed softly. Hao let him out a bit. Then went down on him again. "God, Hao." Hao licked at him. Hanbin came in sobs, and in light tugs to Hao's hair because Hao wasn't moving. He wanted it all. When Hanbin was done, Hao got up to get a washcloth and a clean shirt, maybe to drag Hanbin to the bathroom. But Hanbin pulled him back. He hugged him so tight he could hardly breathe. Hao ran a hand through his hair. Hanbin only hugged him tighter.

"What is it?" Hao asked, his voice barely audible.

Hanbin sighed. "I'd do anything to get to spend every day with you like this," Hanbin said. Hao exhaled. He caressed his hair once again.

"We'll get there," he promised. "And you know that, too."

Kuanjuiii

> *i have a day off wyd*

janghao

> *god good for you*

> *i'm waiting my turn for the concert photoshoot and i have no patience left*

> *wyd*

Kuanjuiii

> *oh cool*

> *send fit photos*

> *i'mmmm getting bored rn so idk maybe i'll find someone to go out with*

janghao

> *... that kind of going out i guess*

Kuanjuiii

> *not all of us have a hot boyfie who fucks us on the regular*

> *also how are you still a prude after all the stuff you get up to with that man idk*

janghao

> *i regret ever speaking to you*

> *"all the stuff i get up to" i literally have a normal relationship with my boyfriend and we're also pretty boring in that department because we're dead tired all the time so it's not like we get up to wild things.*

> *anyway i was just commenting on your incredibly high need of always finding people to date.*

> *yes, i'm judging, don't bother asking*

Kuanjuiii

> *bitch calm down?*

> *maybe if you stopped being boring you'd understand me better yk*

> *and i'm fine with going from casual to casual i don't mind, i have fun*

janghao

> *yeah totally*

Kuanjuiii

- > girl what do you want me to say
- > i'm not built for relationships
- > i'd die if i was in this married-not-married thing like you are with hanbin i'd feel suffocated

janghao

- > this conversation is going nowhere
- > quanrui fought with a stylist earlier
- > bc the stylist had fucked up gyu's hair and now he'd look bad next to rui
- > or that's what he said, bc it was p obvious that he was upset bc gyu was upset but gyu wasn't speaking up bc he felt bad for the stylist and then rui couldn't stand it

Kuanjuiii

- > cute
- > how did it get solved? did it?

janghao

- > more or less
- > started from scratch on his hair (so he sat there forever)
- > quanrui had to apologize and he did
- > gyu's hair's a lot shorter than before but whatever it'll grow back
- > new style
- > gyu ended up crying not bc of the hair but bc rui stood up for him
- > seungeon read a novel unbothered throughout all this and that was our day so far

Kuanjuui

- > eventful
- > you never get bored lol
- > uhh listen i think i'll travel to seoul sometime around NYE
- > you have plans?

janghao

- > WHAAAAAT
- > WHY ARE YOU ONLY TELLING THIS NOW?????
- > no big plans for now tbh
- > my mom will come in early january, so christmas day i think i'll be with bin, and NYE idk, maybe we could set something up with the guys? then my mom travels here for a few days (she'd love to see you i think) and idk lunar new year it's too far away still

Kuanjuiii

- > "christmas day i think i'll be with bin" sick to the stomach
- > anyways i'll be there for nye at the earliest, i can't fly out sooner.

janghao

- > yes please let's do nye together!!!
- > i'll make you meet all the others, we can rent a party room or smth i'll text them if you want

Kuanjuiii

- > "the others"??? who?? any hot guys?

janghao

- > the others = the guys who work and live with hanbin????
- > like, who else?
- > but actually taerae knows a lot of people and he throws killer parties (at least, his birthday was cool) so idk

maybe you'll find someone to your taste

Kuanjuiii

- > *it's highly likely*
- > *are any of hanbin's members single?*

janghao

- > *don't you dare.*
- > *they're off-limits, they're my friends, don't you even think about it.*

Kuanjuiii

- > *hey i'm your friend too!*
- > *and longer than them!*

janghao

- > *kuanjui i'm serious here.*
- > *two of them are dating each other*
- > *the other two are off-limits. look elsewhere. make out with seungeon again if you want, it'd be less messy*

Kuanjuiii

- > *wait*
- > *you knew?*

janghao

- > *oh, he told me*
- > *so: leave my new friends alone thank you*
- > *but i'll still ask taerae to invite a lot of other people*

Kuanjuiii

- > *specify: hot men*
- > *taller than 183 possibly, wide-shoulders, strong thighs.*

janghao

- > *good luck to find your match for tonight, too, if those are the requirements*

Kuanjuui

- > *bet you that i will?*

janghao

- > *suit yourself*

Kuanjuiii

- > *just you wait*
- > *haooooooo it's been just two hours and i have one! white guy, 186, a mountain of a guy, god my fucking luck. i hope he goes back to his stupid country before nye tho because i still want to see what your friend sets up hehe*

janghao

- > *not the tourist just to find him taller???*

“A new start for the five of us” — 5stars talk about upcoming concerts and solo activities

In the last year they've been climbing the charts and storming every headline in the country, 5stars — as you all may know — is a 5 membered idol group, captained by Jiwoong (whom you might have seen as the cover model of three different magazines in the span of six months) and made up of Hanbin, Matthew, Taerae and Gunwook.

Surprisingly enough, they haven't debuted this year: though most of us hadn't heard from them before, they've been around for longer than five years already. Their activities had been halted for a while, due to their company's struggles, but thanks to a renewed energy from all five of them they've managed to turn the tide around.

I've met them in their company's practice room, and they told me all about their upcoming projects, which — let me tell you — are a lot, and all of them very interesting. First of all, though, let me tell you about what the five of them are like from up close. I was welcomed with offerings of snacks and cold beverages (it's November, but they seem to like cold sodas more than hot cups of teas) and they made me have a tour of the rooms they work in. They're all extremely chatty and, honestly, noisy, which makes you like them from the get-go. They're young, and it shows in the way they can't wait to share their jokes and thoughts with you, even though you might not share their same sense of humor. Jiwoong, the oldest and the leader, asked me if I wanted to stay a bit longer so I could "practice with them". It made me laugh, I've never taken dance classes in my life, what a mess I'd make. Their energy is incredibly high and it shows that they're all a tight-knit group, very used to each other's presence. If it wasn't clear, I *loved* talking to them.

When we first started chatting, I had a few questions I'd prepared and ran through with their management, but it's obvious that we soon went off-script. Before you all panic, though, everything featured in this article was approved by the group and their managers. So, I started easy: *You have a three-set of concerts planned for the next month, how does that make you feel?*

Taerae was the first to answer, with a smile that would melt anyone's heart. "I'm excited," he said. "And I'm also nervous, because we've never done something of this scale. We've performed a lot this year, and we've been on some big stages, but to hold a whole concert by ourselves is a very different thing and I can't deny it makes me jittery. We've been preparing diligently, and we're going to show a lot of different sides of ourselves, so I hope it'll be a success, both for us and for who will attend."

Gunwook, the youngest and the tallest, a giant 19 year-old boy, picked up: "We haven't had many albums yet, which allowed us to think about deviating from our repertoire to put together our concert setlist. There will be some covers, and some acoustic sets, and some performances focusing more on the dance area than the vocals. We'll also perform some unreleased songs that will undoubtedly make it onto our next records, so yeah, there's that, too." He has a cute laugh, and it's painfully obvious that the other four can't resist it. They all laugh along with him. Matthew made sure to show me the poster for their Seoul concerts, which I'd seen already, and he wanted me to comment on it. Did I find it cool? Yes, I replied, it's a cool poster. Would I be attending one of the three shows? I told him I didn't have the ticket, but I would have liked to go. He turned to their manager in a second, and begged him to find me a way to get one. I didn't want to get a free ticket, it didn't feel fair, but the five of them insisted so much that I accepted a guest-ticket from their own personal reserves that now I'm going to attend this concert sitting alongside Jiwoong's parents, I fear.

For the next question, I asked them: *You're also going abroad with this setlist. Do you think you will appeal to the foreign public just like you'll do with the locals? Or will you have to change something in your show to better present your charms?*

Hanbin, who never stopped smiling for the whole interview, replied. "Music and dance are universal languages. It's something they teach you when you start approaching these disciplines in a professional way, and it's something we've always agreed on. Our lyrics may be sung in a language our foreign fans don't fully grasp, but our emotions and our energy are something that goes beyond the language itself. As our Wookie [Gunwook, clearly] was saying, there are sections of our show that are devoted to just dancing, and those will be the most universally understandable ones, I think. But maybe that's my own preference for dancing that's speaking," he trails off, laughing.

Matthew doesn't let the conversation fall idle, as he speaks immediately after. "The songs we're covering, too. They won't necessarily be Korean songs," he hints. "We all have very diverse taste in music, so we didn't want to limit ourselves to stuff that's too similar to what we ourselves put out. You can expect anything from our concert," he teases.

It was time for me to focus on more personal questions. I was informed that all five members had solo activities scheduled for the next few months, and I was very curious to understand their perspective on this. I started from Jiwoong, who — I was told — had just come back from yet another shooting. *Your model career is flying high these days*, I told him. *Did you find something you love doing in modeling? Would you like to branch out in something else, too?*

Jiwoong has a gaze that could pin you to the wall and I, a simple entertainment reporter, felt a bit too shy in front of him. “I’ve always wanted to be a singer, truly,” he started. Genuinely speaking, from my own perspective, I’m thankful he accepted to model too, because his photoshoots are a blessing to everyone’s eyes. “But when our company offered me to take up some modeling stunts on the side I was happy about it. I thought it would help our group be better known,” a true leader. “And that was the main reason why I went the first time. I was really nervous, I thought I would do a terrible job, so I had Matthew accompany me. While I was shooting, though, I found that I liked it. I liked the chance to express myself, I liked that I got to play with sides of myself I hadn’t explored yet. I don’t have such a deep knowledge of fashion, yet, but I can say that I’d love to keep learning about it and to keep being a model for a while longer. At the same time, I can’t say there is nothing else I’d like to do. I’m a curious person, so I’d like to do everything. TV, dramas, whatever. As long as I get to stay with the guys, too, I’ll try anything.” Taerae scoffs at the closing sentence, and he’s my next victim just because of it.

Turning to Taerae I am met with a half-mischievous gaze from him, as if he knew he’d earned to be interviewed. He has an aura to him that makes you mistake him for a very polite, almost shy, young man. You’ll soon notice he’s neither shy nor exempt from being a bit wild. *Taerae*, I asked, *you’re a bit of a wild card in my notes and research. I’ve just been told you have a mysterious “solo activity”.* *Can we know something more about that?*

Taerae’s first answer is to laugh. Loud and wheezing. “Maybe I’ll keep the mystery up,” he says, and he says it with such childish joy to it that it makes you want to indulge him. “But, no, poor reporter Lee. Okay, I think my solo activity is one of the most boring among the five of us. We’ve all decided to focus on different things, but there’s only so much you can do, right? So I got the most boring one.” Hanbin laughs on his side. “Just kidding, I picked it myself and I’m extra proud of it. I’ve decided to record an acoustic album, and I’m planning to produce it myself, in a way. I’ve been working with a few musicians, like a band? Yeah, I mean, you could say that my solo project is a rock band. Which is not solo, in the proper sense. But hey, that’s what I decided to do. I have a drummer, a bassist and a lead guitar. I’ll play rhythm guitar and I’ll sing, but I won’t be the only singer. I’ve recruited a few people from my uni department for this project,” he laughs, again. “And they all jumped at the opportunity, of course. It made me the most popular guy, for, like, three days. Then something else came up and they all shifted their interest there.” He’s honest and he’s fun to talk to, and he should be the most popular guy in his department, if he truly isn’t.

It leads me to ask if he still finds time to attend his classes and spend time with his classmates. “I love the university setting,” he confesses. “So, yeah. I try to arrange everything else around it.”

A couple other members laugh at that. I look at them with curiosity. It’s Gunwook who explains. “We always make fun of his obsession for being perceived as this cool sunbae in school,” Matthew laughs too. “He’s never studying at home, though. Going to university is like attending a fashion show, for him. He goes to be looked at. It’s an ego thing.”

Taerae doesn’t allow him to go on like this for long. “It’s not an ego thing,” Taerae insists. “I am a music student, it’s also propaedeutic to the job we do in the group. I like to talk about stuff I know, so I’m studying to be a better singer and a better songwriter and producer, too. Please don’t pay attention to Gunwook’s opinions, he’s just an overgrown elementary schooler.”

“Hey,” Gunwook protests. They tend to drop honorifics and all, they’re a group of people who show a deep level of comfort with each other. It makes me almost feel included. Hanbin shushes the two of them in a way that reminds me of a kindergarten teacher, and order is brought back to the room. For a short while.

So, after learning about Taerae’s band project, and after satisfying one of my deepest curiosities coming into this meeting, I turned to Hanbin. I wanted to save Gunwook for last, because I knew about his project and I felt like he deserved not to feel like others still had to describe theirs, while talking about it. *Hanbin-ssi*, I started, *you set singing aside and returned to something you’d already worked on before. Why did you choose not to explore something new but went back to a previous experience?*

“You know, that’s a cool way to ask about this,” he praises me. “So, while we were discussing with our company

about what to focus on individually — because our company put it like that: it was time we focused each on something, for a short while, while keeping up with the group too — I thought about what would make me grow as a person, right now. In the last few years, when we were less busy I would always find a way to spend time in dance studios. And that helped me gain the mindset that's gotten me, and the group, where we are now. Dancing requires a lot of patience, no matter how much talent you're born with, being a good dancer is the result of endless hours of practice. I'm actually qualified for teaching," he says quite shyly. "So I thought I wanted to focus on sharing my experience as a dancer with other dance students, and I asked the company to open up some classes for me. It's actually a new thing, though, because it's true that I've been dancing for years and that I've taken part in some workshops as a teacher before, but it's the first time that I'm hosting a whole cycle of classes for intermediate and advanced dancers. I'll call some dancer friends to help me, clearly. But I'm really happy for this chance to focus on this side of my art and to be able to share it with others. Dancing can be really fun, and I hope people will sign up to this class in the hope to have fun, more than to be harshly evaluated or anything else."

It's Matthew who adds more details to this. "It's actually insane, because Hanbin hyung didn't even think twice about what his project would be, because he'd already been asked to open up classes by people from outside our company." Hanbin looks like he didn't really want to mention it, but he takes it in stride.

"He's right," he says. "There was a trainee from another company who asked if I was ever going to open classes again, because he was interested in *studying*," he makes air quotes with his fingers, "with me. It seemed ludicrous when I first heard it, it wasn't a good time for me, either. But then I thought about it again, and it started taking roots in my head. I talked about it with a few people, with my friends, with the members. And in the end I asked to do just this. So, yeah, this kid should be thanked, if anything. He gave me the motivation I needed."

I'm curious about this dynamic, frankly: trainees from other companies looking up to an idol who, honestly, rose to fame just recently, but whose dance skills are unrivaled, apparently. So I asked if he expected many people from external agencies to come to his workshops.

Hanbin laughs. "Well, of course there have already been our friends who signed up, but it feels more like a joke than anything else." I am given to understand that by *our friends* 5stars all mean idol group Aw4ke, with whom they share a close friendship. "But I have no idea who's going to come, I won't get a list of participants until we're closer to the dates," he laughs again. "I know about them because the four of them sent screenshots of their enrollment. If you come too," he says to his members, "it'll be like being a single dance crew." He looks like the idea is especially interesting to him.

"Oh," Jiwoong says, suddenly. Matthew is less polite in his exclamation. "Busted," Taerae laughs. He turns to me, "It's hard to plan surprises in this group," he complains.

"But it worked well when you came to the set," Gunwook rebukes, and I'm here, lost, without the chance to say anything, because they start talking over each other and I can't find a way back in the conversation. I become slowly aware that 5stars and Aw4ke (again, all together, because they're *really*, truly, good friends with each other) planned a surprise party for Gunwook when he started filming his drama (more on this later). He didn't expect them to visit him — and bring cake — so he was completely devastated by the unexpected visit.

Jiwoong realizes they're being too chaotic and brings them back to a calmer mood. It's a quick process, they focus back on me in no time.

"Sorry," Hanbin says, first. "We were saying?" I take a look at my notes: the guests in his workshops. "Ah," he laughs. "Right. So, yeah, I have no idea who will be there, aside from the people we mentioned. I can tell you, though, that I hope a lot of people who haven't met me yet come, too. I hope many people will attend, full stop. I hope we can have more of these classes in the years to come."

It was time to turn to talk to Matthew. As I said, I wanted Gunwook to be the last. *Matthew-ssi*, he winks at me. Jiwoong slaps him lightly on the leg. *What about your plans? I know you've started a really big project. How is it going?*

He laughs. Honestly, it's more of a giggle. Matthew's charm is difficult to put into words. I feel like he could make anyone fall for him, regardless of age, gender and everything else. He has the same ability to lure anyone in his proximity that is attributed to sirens. I feel a bit like his next prey. "If you know everything, why don't you tell me what exactly you know, so I can just tell you if it's right or not?" He shrugs.

I start to try and organize a sentence, but he breaks into a bright laugh. "Nah, I was kidding. Sorry, reporter Lee. I'm starting my own talk show," he explains. "I'll have different guests each episode, and I'll talk to them about them and their stories and we'll play some games. An easy, informal, thing."

Nothing about Matthew looks like it could be an easy thing. He looks unpredictable and alluring in the best ways. “The first episode comes out next week, actually,” he says casually, like I didn’t know. “And I’ve decided to start by hosting a very great, incredible, artist. The best vocalist around,” he says.

I ask if he’s talking about their own Taerae, but he laughs in my face. “No, Taerae’s good but I can’t start with my own group member, I’d look cheap,” I don’t know how to reply, so I don’t. “I’ll have Zhang Hao, from Aw4ke.”

I can’t keep myself from saying: “Isn’t that almost like having your own group member? You guys and Aw4ke have been associated with one another for such a long time.”

Matthew shrugs, “Who cares,” he says. “I wanted Hao hyung on the show,” he throws a glance at his members. “But if you have better guests to suggest to me, I’ll accept. We can film the first episode from scratch.” He winks at me, again. “Hao hyung won’t be upset,” he adds.

I develop a suspicion at a certain point, so I take my phone out. I look up on their socials, but the first guest of his show hasn’t actually been announced yet. “Were you making fun of me?” I ask. “Is Zhang Hao really your first guest?”

He laughs. The other four are suspiciously silent. “You’ll have to watch my show, reporter Lee,” he says. “The first guest is a complete surprise,” he makes me feel stupid. I don’t find the feeling bad, though. “Or, is it?”

“Stop toying with him,” Jiwoong chides. I wonder what they’re all really thinking. They look amused, but it doesn’t look like something rehearsed. “None of us has ever any idea what Matthew will say,” he shrugs. Hanbin looks a bit apologetic, at least.

“I’m in love with the concept of my talk show,” Matthew goes on, unperturbed. “I can’t wait to have all kinds of amazing guests. Like, I want the highest supermodels, but maybe I’ll start small with Jiwoong hyung. And it’d be nice to have a rockstar, too.” The jab at Taerae is clear. “As for dancers, I don’t know. Sung Hanbin is on the shortlist, but it depends if he’ll explore some more appealing styles. Hyung,” he turns to Hanbin. “If you promise to dance on heels on my show, I’ll invite you.” Hanbin throws a look at me. I don’t know how to help him, honestly. “But, I’m sure that there’s this new actor I’ll surely have. He’s the hottest sensation. Actor. Park. Gunwook.”

Gladly, I take the assist. *Gunwook-ssi*, I turned to him, I must’ve looked desperate. *Your acting debut, tell me all about it.*

His smile turns into a joyful laugh, maybe from the phrasing of my question. I’ve been exhausted by Matthew. I didn’t think it would go like this, I’m honest here. “I’m so happy about this drama,” Gunwook starts. “The filming should wrap-up soon, if everything goes according to plan. And this would leave me enough time to rehearse well for our concerts. It’s been a bit of a struggle, fitting everything together, but it’s been great. I’d never dared to dream of acting, I felt like I didn’t have the right face for it.” He must be lying, I hope he is. He has a *perfect* face, there’s no other way of describing it. “Still, the hyungs all helped me to get into the character and I can happily say that there’s a little bit of each of them in him.”

How so? I’m curious, because it’s a very precious thing to say and he’s saying it with a great amount of ease. It’s surprisingly easy to forget he’s so young. “Oh, you’ll see later on, but there are certain things that he does that are clearly inspired by them. Like, an example, when his classmates are being too noisy, he shushes them in the same way Hanbin hyung does with us.” Hanbin is smiling in his corner. “Or, the way he’s so close to his sister, it’s all Matthew hyung’s. These people have been my family for so many years,” Gunwook debuted in the group when he was 14, he trained with them for a few months before debut, it’s only natural he’s so close to them. “And it’s impossible for me to think of creating a new personality from scratch without something that comes from them.”

Everyone stays silent. I ask: *is that true for your real personality too, then?* Gunwook laughs. “Well, we’ve lived together everyday for the last five years, I think we’re all intertwined very deeply. I know for a fact that we will be forever in each other’s minds even when we’re not roommates anymore.”

The question comes natural: *Are you planning to leave your dorm soon, then?* Gunwook shakes his head vehemently. “No, no. Not me,” he’s quick to say. “Me and Taerae hyung have made a promise to each other. We’re going to be roommates forever.”

“That’s because you’re not roommates now,” Matthew rebukes.

“Well, I hope that if I move out with Gunwook we’ll get an apartment with two single bedrooms,” Taerae replies, with a shrug. “I’ve had enough of sharing wardrobes and rooms.”

I try to bring the focus back to Gunwook’s drama. *And what is something about acting that you’ve been surprised by?* Gunwook looks lost in thought. “Well, I was surprised by the genuine friendship I’ve developed with the other actors,” he says, a bit shy. “I’ve never acted before and they made me the lead, while some of them have been acting for years. So I believed they wouldn’t want to be friends with me,” he laughs. “It’s silly, looking back on it. Because as

soon as we started reading together it was clear that we would get closer, and it turned out like that. I found out later that both [Choi] Jaesang hyung and [Shin] Minju noona had bought our latest album and they brought it to be autographed.” *Did you sign it for them?* “Yeah, but the next day I brought them the previous one with everyone’s autographs on it. Minju noona yelled at me because it was too much. Jaesang hyung, instead, told me he would keep until the market value rose enough to make him rich.” Gunwook has a happy air around him, it’s clear he’s glad he works in a relaxed atmosphere.

What do you want to tell our readers to expect from your acting debut, then? Gunwook’s eyes go wide. “Well,” he says, cutely. “They shouldn’t watch this drama just because I’m in it, but because it’s a fun drama. The plot is a bit insane, but it’ll make you laugh a lot. So they should expect to have fun. And to be suspicious of their classmates’ secret lives,” he laughs it off.

After this, Stars challenged me to film some TikToks with them. I hope they never see the light of day, but I fear they’ll share them after this article is released. If you never hear from me again, this has been Lee Jihan, reporter for *Entertainment Today*.

Gunwook’s cast members were all very happy when they showed up at the wrap party. They’d debated going, to be fair. Hanbin had been a hard supporter of the idea of *not* going, it was Gunwook’s thing, he should have experiences that didn’t involve them all the time. He’d said it to Gunwook himself. *You should enjoy your friendships without us in the way*, he’d told him. Gunwook had waved him off, like he wasn’t making any sense. Hanbin had then tried persuading the others to put up a united front against going. It had worked with Jiwoong, and it was working — although Hanbin knew he would have to compromise something, to offer something back — with Taerae and Matthew. But, of course, it had to crumble down when Gyuvin called, super happy, about having been invited, too. No amount of pleading with them via Hao had managed to dissuade Quanrui, Gyuvin and Seungeon from going. Which meant that all the rest had to go, too, or they would just look like assholes.

“It’s not a bad party,” Hao said, when Hanbin brought him a glass filled with a very bland cocktail that tasted like orange and alcohol. It wasn’t a bad party, but it wasn’t *their* party. It wasn’t supposed to be, but people kept coming to talk to them, too, and congratulating them on their success, their projects, and the small Japan tour they were soon to be leaving for.

“This tastes like shit,” Hanbin commented, about the cocktail, because he was upset for having to be here in the first place and he had to find something to blame it on.

Hao rolled his eyes and bumped their shoulders together. “Stop being grumpy,” he said. Hanbin didn’t feel like stopping, though. “Oh, they’re turning the volume up,” Hanbin had noticed, too. If he danced, he would have fun, and he would lose all the pretexts to complain. Hao knew that, too, and he was trying not to smile. “Do you want to dance?” Hao said, with his eyes looking right into Hanbin’s. “Let’s dance, Bingbing,” Hanbin must have had a really gloomy expression, if Hao had resorted to such a sugary nickname.

“Fine,” he conceded. Hao smiled so happily. Hanbin just wanted to sulk in peace, why did he have to be fucking weak in front of his boyfriend’s smile? “That smile of yours is a lethal weapon,” he muttered. Hao took him by the hand, dragged him to where a few people were already dancing and he jumped right in the middle of the small crowd. Hanbin followed him, and he was already feeling better. Hao moved to the beat in a hypnotic way, his limbs drawing patterns in the air around him, his head abandoned back, his hips hitting the counts with utmost precision. Hanbin could look at him forever. Or, more likely, he could look at him all night, with the knowledge that he would get to kiss him soon. It would be intolerable, otherwise. Looking at someone so incredibly beautiful without being allowed to have him would send Hanbin insane. Hao locked his gaze with him. He dragged him closer. “Hao-”

“We’re just dancing,” he said, but his hands settled on Hanbin’s shoulders, and his face moved too close to Hanbin’s. His hands automatically reached Hao’s waist. Hao was still moving to the music, and Hanbin decided to just follow his lead and go with it. Damned be the photos that would surely come out of the two of them dancing like this. He hoped their faces weren’t clear, in the dim light and multi-colored reflections of multiple mirrorballs. Hao only hugged him for the first song, because then the music shifted to something much more upbeat and he detangled himself from Hanbin, dancing much more energetically and freely. Hanbin was keeping up with him, but every look they exchanged was more charged than the previous one. It was still insane, for Hanbin, that Hao might like him so much.

That he would never get bored of Hanbin, that he would always *want* Hanbin like that. They didn't see each other often enough, if Hanbin was fair. And every time they were together, Hanbin struggled to keep his hands to himself. Hao had opened up a previously unknown well of desire in Hanbin, but if he was honest it wasn't only a desire to touch and be touched, it was more the incomprehensible need to spend every waking hour together, to have Hao close all the time, to talk to him, to hear what he had to say, to ask his opinion about things, to do the most mundane of things together. Hanbin had never thought he would lose his mind over someone like this.

"Yo, lovebirds," Gyuvin materialized next to them. Quanrui was close to him, with a flushed face that made him look like he was getting drunk. "Can we dance with you?"

"Sure," Hanbin stepped back to make space for them. "Have you drunk a lot?" He asked Quanrui.

"There was a girl who kept filling his glass," Gyuvin explained, "and he sucks at saying no, so I had to drag him away." What. He threw a look at Hao, who just looked amused. "So, now he's also a bit sad because he thinks he broke this girl's heart," Gyuvin went on, yelling over the music.

"It was inevitable," Hao commented, and he resumed his swaying to the beat.

"Why, inevitable?" Hanbin tried to ask. Hao just looked at him with a smile. He would have to remind himself to ask later on. "I don't get it," he concluded.

"Oh, my baby," Hao took his hand to make him dance along. "I *love* this song," Hao was impossible to talk to right now, Hanbin gave up. He allowed himself to get lost in the music, as well. Gyuvin was a messy party-dancer, the kind that yells all the lyrics and jumps around, and it was so fucking funny to witness. He knew all the songs, and more than once he improvised choreos to them. Hanbin let himself be dragged into some of the choreographies without qualms, and, more than once, he dragged Hao in them as well.

Gunwook, the star of the night, joined them, at a certain point, with his co-star Jaesang. "Hyung," Gunwook was keeping his voice loud enough to be heard over the music. "Jaesang hyung asked me if he can dance with you guys," he said.

Hao's hand closed around Hanbin's elbow. "Sure," Hanbin replied, and he brought his own hand over Hao's. "Welcome?" Gunwook stayed with them only briefly, and then he left again. Hanbin followed him with his eyes, until he saw that he was talking with Matthew and a few other people. He turned back to Jaesang. "We've met on the set," Hanbin yelled.

"Yes, I remember you," Jaesang replied, still loud. "Gunwook keeps talking about you," he added.

"At home he talks a lot about you, too," Hanbin said back. "You remember Hao, right?"

Jaesang grinned. "Sure," he was staring at Hao, now. Hanbin felt Hao's grip on his arm tighten. "I know it's the wrong setting to tell you this," Jaesang said, yelling a bit. "But I wanted to thank you for two things. The first one is for being such great friends and older brothers to Gunwookie," okay. Weird ass phrasing, though. Hanbin threw a quick glance at Hao. "The second one is for everything you two have done this year. For us, you know."

Hao let go of him. His eyes were round. "Us?"

Hanbin was already grinning before Jaesang spoke. "I'm gay, too," he said. Hanbin laughed. Gunwook kept collecting gay friends. It had to be hilarious. "I know," Jaesang laughed, too. "He's surrounded."

Hao was laughing, too, now. Hanbin wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "So, are you here just to thank us or are you here to ask if you can hit on him?" Hao suggested it, and it was outrageous, just the *idea* of it was insane. Hanbin felt his jaw fall slack open. It couldn't be. Not his own son. He was too young.

"He's too young," Hanbin replied, instantly. Hao broke out in a loud laughter. Hanbin's face burnt.

"I'm just one year older than him," Jaesang said. No, this couldn't be happening. Hanbin looked, helplessly, towards Hao. "But, honestly, I wanted to know if I can hit on your other bandmate," Jaesang looked a bit too sheepish.

"Who?" Hanbin was shocked. Why were people asking his permission to hit on his friends, couldn't they just try and see how it went? What did it matter what he thought? "I mean, I'm just curious. If it's not Gunwook, you can do what you want." Hao pressed his face against his shoulder, laughing too hard.

"Taerae?" *What*. Well. Taerae would tell him no, he would turn him down, because he'd finally managed to start interacting with the guy he'd been crushing on forever. The band plot had really worked. Insanity, if you asked Hanbin. But who was Hanbin to deny Jaesang a good flirting session with Taerae?

"He's a tough one to crack," he settled for. "Good luck," he was sincere. Hao waited for Jaesang to walk away with a big smile on his face. Then he turned to Hanbin with a teasing expression.

"You're so overprotective with Gunwook," he pointed out. Whatever. He honestly just wanted Gunwook to have more friendships outside the group. Relationships weren't friendships. He needed more friends, not dates. Trust

Hanbin's parental instincts. "I like your jealousy," Hao added. Hanbin frowned a bit. "You're possessive, don't try to hide it," Hao went on. "And I love it."

"What the fuck?" Hanbin breathed. "Like you're not-" Hao kissed him. In the middle of a room crowded with people. It was a first, it was something that couldn't happen again. It was insane, because Hanbin hadn't known how much he could want something like this. His heart was beating too loud and it was taking up all the space under his ribs. Hanbin exhaled against Hao's mouth, catching his lips between his own. Then he broke away. "You're worse than me, though."

"Oh, I know," Hao smiled. Shit. Hanbin looked away. "Let's dance some more?"

"I think I need some air," Hanbin actually replied.

It promised rain, that was the kind of atmosphere that had welcomed them on the wide balcony of the reception hall. Hao leaned against the parapet, as close to Hanbin as he could be without touching him. Hanbin wondered if he was upset about something, about him not really kissing him back, maybe, about the way the whole night was progressing. "I was thinking," Hao said, and Hanbin cranked his head to look at him a bit better.

"Yeah?" Hao was looking at him with a tiny smile on his lips. He didn't look like there was something worrying him.

"It had been a while since I attended a party like this," Hao said. "And I can't say I'd missed the feeling, but I also can't deny that it feels good." Hanbin wasn't sure he could fully understand the feeling. He still nodded. "Hanbin, what would you be doing in your life if you weren't an idol singer?"

Hanbin thought about it for just a couple seconds. "I'd be majoring in dance at university," he said. "And I'd be teaching dance classes in my free time. And maybe I would have found a friend from the music department in my same uni, and I would still be friends with Taerae." He hesitated. If he hadn't picked this career, he and Hao-

"I would have been a music teacher, I think," Hao said. "Do you think that we would have met at some seminar or something?"

Hanbin shifted closer to him. "I don't know," he said, honestly. "I'm just happy I met you in this life," Hao leaned his head on his shoulder. Hanbin laid his own head on top of Hao's. Time could have stopped, for what mattered. "Ah," he started again, after a while. "You know how there's a new exhibition opening up, there's supposed to be a lot of international artists lending pieces to the SeMA and I've read that it's, like, a once in a lifetime occasion. And also there's a dancer I'm super in awe of that's doing a couple dates in Seoul this month, and I know we're busy, but I'd love to go and see him and his company, and if you're free it'd be wonderful to go together, because it's been forever since we've gone-"

"Yes," Hao interrupted him. "Tell me about this dancer, and be sure to get a ticket for me," he said, and Hanbin had to move back a bit because if he had to explain why he loved this choreographer he would need space because he wouldn't keep his hands still. The point was, Hanbin had always focused on more pop dance styles, as a dancer, but the love he had for contemporary ballet was insane, and this choreographer was known for his use of dozens of styles all together, putting up some very intricate, stimulating, shows. And his dancers were all extra talented because they had to excel in all styles at once and it was such a hard thing to achieve, and Hanbin was addicted to their YouTube channel. Hao's attention never wavered as he listened to him speak, and he kept asking questions, too, and Hanbin had to whip out his phone to show him some of their stuff because he couldn't bring himself to describe it in a satisfactory way, and Hao looked amazed, too, which made Hanbin happy as he'd made him discover something new he liked, and they wasted so much time on this, that in the end Gunwook came to find them.

"Ah," he said. Hanbin found him wearing a perplexed expression. "I honestly thought I'd find you making out," Hanbin's cheeks caught fire. "And you're here, being nerds?"

Hao scoffed, "You should be nicer to your hyungs," he replied. Hanbin pocketed his phone, and he pulled Gunwook closer to the two of them.

"Did you have fun at your party?" He asked him, and it was a stupid question, because Gunwook looked the happiest he could be, with a faint blush on his cheek and a thin layer of sweat on his forehead, and the biggest smile on his face.

"Jaesang hyung and Minju noona promised to hang out in the future, too," he replied, as if he knew perfectly well what Hanbin's question implied. Genuinely, Hanbin loved that they all knew him so well. He loved that it meant they cared about each other so much that they understood every nuance. "And I think that Quanrui hyung and Gyuvin hyung made friends with them, too. They're all the same age, you know?" Hanbin glanced at Hao. He was smiling, too.

Hanbin hummed quietly. “Tae’s band members, too, are more or less your age, so you should try to befriend them too.” It was just a suggestion, but Hanbin was serious about his idea that Gunwook’s friendship should expand.

“You don’t have many friends outside us, though,” Gunwook pointed out. “So why should I?”

Hao chuckled, the asshole. “Well, I used to have a lot of friends, growing up,” Hanbin said. “The people from school, the people from all the dance academies I attended,” he stopped. “I’m still friends with most of the dancers I studied with, though,” he just hardly ever hung out with them, it was true. “But you’ve been in this group since you were thirteen, Wook-ah,” he thought too often about it. “You’ve never had the chance or the *time* to hang out with other people that weren’t us, except from your classmates. I don’t want you to abandon us, of course I don’t. But you should also get to have your own set of people, like Taerae does with all his school friends, or the ex-trainees, or the band. He’s the best at keeping in contact with people, honestly. I’d love to be your friend forever, Gunwook-ah, but I want to see you grow to be the amazing man I know you can be,” Gunwook’s eyes were teary. “I want to get to know a Gunwook that has lived his life to the best, with no regrets, and I will keep pushing you to do it. So, please, understand your hyung,” Gunwook was going to hug him, he knew. “Because hyung loves you.”

“I know,” Gunwook said, wetly. And he dragged Hanbin into a hug, and he also must have enveloped Hao in it, too, because there they were, the three of them, all hugging chaotically on a stupid balcony in the midst of a drama cast party. “Thank you,” Gunwook muttered. “And thank you, Hao hyung, for taking care of our Hanbin like this.” Hanbin heard Hao’s laughter come out loud and full and happy. He would call Hanbin a crybaby, later, right before they would part for the night. And Hanbin would shrug, and he would accept the nickname, because it was true, and Matthew would make fun of him, too, but he would also thank Hanbin, later, for going to the party even if he didn’t feel like it, for always worrying about them, for helping Jiwoong lead this group. Hanbin would wave it off, saying it was nothing worth mentioning, and Taerae would make him cry again saying that if it wasn’t for him they wouldn’t have known the meaning of family. In all this, Jiwoong would just be sobbing and hugging Gunwook, their grown-up baby, their TV star, the most beautiful child they would ever get to love. “What if any of you has a son someday?” Gunwook would ask.

“Well, a lot has to change in a short time for that to happen,” Taerae would reply, but he would still leave a kiss on Gunwook’s hair. “You’d still be our first-born.”

Bin <3

> *ohhhh i found another one, are you ready?*

janghao

> *hit me*

> *i’m ready*

Bin <3

> *okay here you go*

> *[Bin <3 sent a link:*

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimawake on X (Twitter)

“i might be crazy but i’m pretty sure they’re back to doing lovestagram posts as it was at the beginning of the year? like what’s this behavior hao and bin???? two different paintings from the same exhibition?? do you think we’re dumb? anyway haobin date confirmed!”]

janghao

> *for me it’s the comment that says “girl you should work for the fbi how do you even know if the two paintings are exhibited in the same place”*

Bin <3

> *lol*

> *some of them are reaching tho*

> *look at this one*

> *[Bin <3 sent a link:*

tired but awake @tiredbutaw4ke on X (Twitter)

“so if hao shared in his live that he’s excited for the concerts should it mean that he’s also going to see 5stars in concert? why would he use the plural if that wasn’t the case?? idk i hope he’ll go to see them too”]

janghai

> that one person who replied “bro they’re doing two concerts back to back, i’m sure it warrants the plural”
> dead.

Bin <3

> it’s too much fun i can’t stopppp
> oh wait matt sent me a different one (i brought him into this)
> [Bin <3 sent a link:

how many stars? @my5starsare5 on X (Twitter):

“so taerae’s bbl photo showed six pairs of shoes in their entryway, do they have hao over?”]

> like no, we’re just untidy

janghai

> i suddenly want to make a fake account and post like that too

> i want to be both a liar and super honest

> like imagine if we posted there a photo of idk nothing and said “omg they were together” and then we actually were but it’s impossible to know from the photo

Bin <3

> what
> why??

janghai

> why not, though?

Bin <3

> look at this one

> [Bin <3 sent a link:

any keysmash @nightsky on X (Twitter):

> quanrui said that if he had to change roommates he would never choose hao because he snores too loudly, but then gyuvn told him he’s a snorer too yet he keeps him as his roommate. i think they’re just implying that hao doesn’t sleep alone…….”]

> don’t you sleep alone, haohao? who are you hiding in your room huh? HAHHAHAHAHAHAH

janghai

> well tbh i snore way more loudly than gyu

> but gyu also wanted rui to tell him he wouldn’t change him for the world, he’s on a mission these last few days, i have money on them ending up together you know?

Bin <3

> how much money are we talking about
> gambling is illegal

janghai

> how is that your priority hanbinnn

Bin <3

> i mean.

janghao

> seungie will pay me dinner if i'm right, and vice versa.
> happy now?

Bin <3

> yup!
> gtg now sorry, rehearsals are starting again, i'll send you more insanity later onn
> bye bye

janghao

> have fun
> i was thinking, do you think there are some youtube edits about us?
> WAIT I FOUND THEM
> oh if i saw them you have to see them too.
> [janghao sent a link]
> [janghao sent a link]
> [janghao sent a link]

Bin <3

> hyung wtf
> HYUNG WTF WHY DID YOUTUBE GIVE ME "10 MOMENTS WHEN 5STARS WERE ALL GAY FOR EACH OTHER" I DON'T WANT TO SEE IT EW
> well to be fair it was mostly matt making bedroom eyes to jiwoong so,,,

janghao

> do you think we've had enough internet for today?

Bin <3

> it's likely

janghao

> okay baby then i'll call you later

Bin <3

> when you're ready
> ttyl
> [Bin <3 sent a sticker]

janghao

> cringe, darling
> pick better ones, it looks like something your dad would send

Bin <3

> you've been texting with him huh
> it takes an expert to divine his taste in stickers

janghao

> i told you he always sends me the most random updates about your pets
> the other day!!!
> he sent me your sister's old report card?

Bin <3

> to me tooooooo

> *i have no explanations to offer im sorry*
> *i'm going to take a shower*
> *talk to you later love*

janghao
> *have fun showering*
> *like, sing a fun tune*
> *use the shampoo bottle as a mic*
> *pretend you're beyoncé*
> *do you ever do that?*
> *i do that often tbh*
> *well, i'll call you later, i have to eat dinner bye for now*

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now

20231208 Gyuvin posts on Bubble
[TRANS]

ya! i've got to think about christmas gifts for the guys but it's always extra hard to find presents for these people
ugh

like, seungeon is easy enough to buy things for, he's happy no matter what, but shen quanrui has everything
already what should i get him

noooooo i want to impress him, it has to be a good gift!

hao hyung? he's like seungie. easy to make happy, that hyung is cute

oh no

do you think the others will give me presents and i have to buy something for them too??? like what do you even
buy for someone like kim jiwoong-nim? hhhhhhhhhhhhhh

i need to make a phone call oopsie

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now

20231208 Seungeon posts on Bubble
[TRANS]

I think Kim Gyuvin should be revoked his access to this platform

Anyway, how are you all?

Have you had a good day? I spent the day practicing, tomorrow's the big day!!

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now

20231209 Quanrui posts on Bubble
[TRANS]

yeeeeeeee how was it?? were we cool?? did you have fun?

ahhhh i know i know not everyone managed to attend, but we're planning a lot more dates so we'll see each other soon, won't we?

hahahha i think gyuvinn-ssi was pretty handsome too but don't tell him

no, maybe not more handsome than me, but close?

if we're close? me and gyuvinn-ssi? mmmh. his brother calls me brother-in-law but he's mistaken lol

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now

20231209 Zhang Hao posts on Bubble
[TRANS]

yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa we made itttttt it was amazingggg

i love you all a lot omg

and the members' families were there too that's so great!!! my three other sets of parents!!

thank you for always being by my side i love you too much

bestest (and only) sibling

- > *oppa your boyfriend's concert was insane you missed a whole lot*
- > *sucks to be you*

hanbinsung

>

> *thanks areum-ah*

> *it's not like i wanted to come but i'm involved in my own concert rehearsals huh*

bestest (and only) sibling

- > *i don't think your concert will be as good as his tho*
- > *but i'll be the judge*
- > *also, could i like be introduced to his members? they're cute*

hanbinsung

> *ask him*

> *i'm not getting into this*

> *i don't want to know anything*

bestest (and only) sibling

- > *wow someone's sulky*
- > *oki doki*
- > *wait no.*
- > *i can't just go and text hao oppa like this.*
- > *we're not like,,, talking, properly. we just texted for the concert.*
- > *oppa. ya. no i can't ask him that, it's out of the question*
- > *oh god what was i thinking*

hanbinsung

> *sorry i was on the phone with hao*

> *i'm back*

> *you can do what you want you're free and you're also old enough*

> *but don't let me know*

bestest (and only) sibling

> *what did you talk about with hao?*

hanbinsung

> *mind your business*

> *he told me about the concert and about his plans for tmr*

> *and then we discussed christmas eve*

bestest (and only) sibling

> *ooooohhh*

> *wyd christmas eve?*

hanbinsung

> *dinner?*

> *i think*

> *mom wants us both with you lot on the 25th so we can't go much further than to a restaurant*

bestest (and only) sibling

> *fuck i have to buy a christmas present for hao oppa???*

> *i hate this holiday why did we elect to borrow it from the americans? couldn't they not import it?*

hanbinsung

> *i don't think the birth of jesus christ is an american invention tho?*

bestest (and only) sibling

> *but consumerism is.*

> *shit mom will want us to go to church too*

> *your chinese boyfriend won't go, right? he's chinese.*

hanbinsung

> *fuck i'd forgotten about church*

> *no of course he won't go but because we can't just go to church together and be seen in a fucking church on christmas day with my whole family you genius*

> *you know that non-catholic people can step into churches, right? it's not like they combust if they do.*

bestest (and only) sibling

> *you're so rude to me idk*

> *anyway gotta go, but tell me if hao oppa tells you something that i can use as a small present pls im desperate*

> *love you bye*

Hao's mother had made him spend an insane amount of money just to satisfy her completely paranoid expectations on what to give people for Christmas. Of course he wasn't expected to give presents *for Christmas* to Hanbin's parents. He was just supposed to buy something for Hanbin, because he was his lover. And that was supposed to be it, but the insanity virus had stricken hard, apparently, because Hanbin's mother had asked him to join them for

lunch. “It’s not really a traditional thing,” she’d said, over the phone, when she’d called Hanbin and made him put her on speaker in order to talk to Hao. “But Hanbin’s coming home to join us for mass, and we can’t really leave you alone.” Hanbin’s expression had been very complicated. There was no joy in the prospect of having to go to mass, he could see it. But Hao had accepted her invitation, and now he couldn’t be a bad guest and show up empty-handed. And his own mother had stepped in, saying that he should properly thank the Sung-Han family for letting him join in such a significant moment of their year. After days of sending links back and forth with his mother, they’d reached the conclusion that he would buy them a very elegant picture frame: it didn’t scream “Christmas present” and it was also sort of implying that he would stay in their family for a long time. Not scary at all, huh. He’d freaked out over it on the phone with Kuanjui for hours on end, until Kuanjui had all but made him admit that he wasn’t scared of the idea of a lifetime with Hanbin, not really. (“I’ll make sure to send flowers for your wedding, then,” Kuanjui had glossed. “It’s not legal,” Hao had pointed out, as if *that* was the problem and not the fact that he was talking about marrying Hanbin, “we don’t live where you do, you lucky asshole.”)

As if that wasn’t enough to think about in-between concert rehearsals and too many hours spent discussing styling choices with the staff, Hao was faced with the news that Gyuvin had decided to buy presents *for everyone*. Insanity. Complete insanity. This wasn’t what Hao had been raised like. (“I can’t buy all these presents, what am I, rich?” Hao had complained, but Hanbin had been laughing because he’d found out from Twitter, of all places.) So. If Hao already disliked Christmas, this year he was going to hate it, viscerally.

“So, where are you taking me?” Hanbin asked, glancing out of his passenger-side window every two milliseconds. Hao could see that it was stressing him, not being the one driving. But Hao had made the reservations, and Hao did have a driving license, and he’d been practicing and he was a fully adult man so he could drive, even in Seoul. And Hanbin would have to come to terms with it. Though maybe it wasn’t that he didn’t trust Hao, it was more that he was used to driving and it felt unusual being driven.

“You’ll see,” Hao replied, and he didn’t look away from the red traffic light above them. The turn signal was ticking rather loudly.

“Am I underdressed?” Hanbin asked. Was he worried or was he trying to get Hao to spoil the surprise? “Overdressed? Can someone be really overdressed with a shirt and dark pants, though?”

“Clothes don’t really matter,” Hao shot back. The light was still red, why was it lasting forever?

“Huh?” Hanbin laughed. “Should I have worn sweatpants?” Hao shrugged. “Can you please tell me something? Like, give me something to work with.”

Hao threw a look at him, but a short one, because his eyes were round and he would crumble. “It’s a surprise for you, just accept that,” he said. Hanbin sighed.

“I don’t like this, Hao,” he said, softly. “It’s not fair that you do all the work for a date and I don’t contribute at all,” sometimes, Hao couldn’t stand him.

“Maybe I wanted to plan it?” He snapped, and finally the light was green. He made the turn. “What’s wrong with planning things for the two of us? It’s not like I’m slaving away and you’re the only one who enjoys the benefits, I’m here to have fun with you, too. So, wait a bit more.” Hanbin shut up, if anything. Then he started naming random places where Hao could be taking him. A zoo (“Why?”), a museum (“Too crowded, it’s a Sunday”), an amusement park (“Are you eight years old?”), a spa (“If you just want to be naked with me we don’t need a spa”), a pizza restaurant where the chefs only spoke in terribly accented Korean (“It’s a bit specific, don’t you think?”), a sushi restaurant that fronts for a criminal organization (“I’m never watching Netflix with you again”). When Hao parked, in an underground garage, he imagined Hanbin would jump out of the car in curiosity. Hanbin kissed his cheek, instead. And he made Hao’s breath stutter.

“Thanks for driving me,” Hanbin whispered. “And for taking care of this,” Hao wanted him to keep to the schedule he’d worked out, where making out with each other only happened after dinner. And before taking clothes off of each other. Hao had programmed everything. And it was him who turned to his right a bit and met Hanbin’s mouth with his own. And fuck the program. Hanbin smiled against his kiss and Hao ended up tangling his hand in his hair and running his thumb along his cheek. Hanbin’s tongue against his lips was hot and Hao was suddenly reminded that they were in a stupid parking lot and he’d reserved a perfectly comfortable room for this precise purpose.

He slowly detangled the two of them, straightened their shirts and cardigans and flicked Hanbin’s forehead with a finger. “You’re distracting me,” he said, sulkily. “Let’s go upstairs before you kiss me again,” Hanbin laughed, loud.

“I just pecked your cheek,” he pointed out. “But whatever. Let me grab my backpack, it’s important.”

Hanbin kept calling him all kind of offensive things while they made their way up with the elevator, up from the reception desk where Hao (on his own, because Hanbin shouldn't be seen with him, not this close, not while he was clearly picking up the keycard to a room in a hotel where it was clear they were going to spend the night) had redeemed the reservation he'd made. *Asshole* was the first, *crazy asshole* was the second, not too original, *you imbecile, you fucking* - Hanbin was looking at him with a new expression Hao had never seen on him. He looked completely vulnerable and like he, himself, didn't know what to say or do. "You didn't have to go all this way," Hanbin said, when the string of curses was broken. "A fucking hotel? You got us a hotel room? On Christmas?" Yeah, whatever. Hao wanted them to have a normal date, without worrying about roommates and managers and anyone else. Just them. Just the two of them.

"I found a coupon online, don't fret," Hao stepped closer to him. Hanbin's mouth was slightly open. It would be so easy to just kiss him like that. "There was a seventy percent discount on early reservations," he explained.

"When did you-" Hanbin blinked. The elevator stopped. Hao stepped away, and then they both made their way, rather silently, to their room. It wasn't grand. Hao couldn't afford anything better than this, but the bed looked comfortable, and it was a double and not two twin-sized they would have to push together, like Kuanjui had told him it would likely be. There was little else. A tiny wardrobe they wouldn't use, a small desk pushed against a wall and two thin bedside tables in the shape of shelves. "I feel a bit insane," Hanbin confessed. "I thought we were heading out for dinner and I would sleep at your place." Hao had forced him to pack an overnight bag, hence his deduction. "This is-" Hao saw him struggle to find words. "This is too much? But it's also so great. Fuck, I'm-" he wrapped his arms around Hao. He hooked his head over Hao's shoulder. "What did I do to deserve you?"

Hao smiled. And he let out the breath he'd been holding for days. "Mhh," he pretended to consider it. "Maybe you saved a nation in your previous life," he joked. "I'm so amazing, after all. You must have been pretty cool, too."

Hanbin didn't let go of their hug. "Cooler than I am now?" Hao laughed. No version of Hanbin could top the one he knew, he thought. But he would love them all nonetheless.

"Well, you're a bit of a loser right now, if we're honest," Hao lied. "Getting all flustered because your boyfriend got you a room." Hanbin let him go just a bit. "Are you shy of what could happen in this room?"

Hanbin's serious expression fell in a split instant. He was laughing loud and Hao was laughing with him and Hanbin gave him an exaggerated, grotesque, wink, before he stepped away from Hao once and for all. Hao was a lucky man, to be loved by someone like him. If Hanbin had had to save a nation to deserve this, then Hao must have done the same.

Hanbin insisted he pay for the room service, Hao let him. They drank more than they should, quicker than they should, and the empty wine bottle sat between them for very little time before Hao got up to his feet from the floor they'd been sitting on, a bit uncertain, and he reached for his suitcase, on the other side of the bed. Hanbin had made fun of him bringing up a whole suitcase. Now he was silent, as Hao handed him his present. Hanbin opened it, almost reverent, sneaking looks at Hao every other second. There was a drunk flush on his cheeks that made him look younger and softer and Hao wanted to save this image of Hanbin forever. To remember it forever, him, all soft around the edges, unable to look away from Hao even when he was supposed to care about his gift. "Wow," Hanbin exhaled. "It's- I love it," he said. He was holding the leather bag in his hands and looking at it from every angle.

"They said it's good as a carry-on for planes," Hao said, with the sudden desire to tell him why he'd picked that for him. "Since you're traveling to Japan soon," he started. So you can keep a part of me with you, Hao didn't say. Sometimes it was still too much. He wasn't good at saying the things he felt, because they were too big, they were too forceful. The love he felt for Hanbin, honestly, it was something that could move a planet. At times, it felt almost excessive for two people like them, what did they need all this love for? And then Hanbin smiled, like he always did, and he started opening every pocket of his new bag and the next thing out his mouth was enough to calm every single doubt Hao could ever hold.

"It's what I immediately thought about," he said. "I'll be so happy to travel with something of yours with me." Hao felt the smile grow on his own face. He kept looking at Hanbin as he opened his backpack and fished out a wrapped box that had been taking up half the space in there. "Merry Christmas, ge," he said. "It's a bad gift, compared to yours, but I didn't know you'd be so insane on a holiday you hate."

Hao unwrapped the colorful paper messily, ripping it in more than one spot, and then he opened the rigid box inside it and then- "A *bad* gift?" Hanbin had given him, like, ten different skincare products. Top brands. All calibrated to Hao's habits. "Boy, let me tell you what a truly bad gift is, because this is a marriage-worthy gift."

"Like, a gift you'd give on the occasion of a marriage or a gift that warrants that you have to marry the gifter?"

Hanbin's voice was tinted with the brightest hue of joy.

"Well, that depends," Hao was smiling so wide it hurt.

"I have a strong preference for one option over the other, just letting you know," Hanbin joked. Hao took a breath, it was shaky. Hanbin had joined him to sit on the mattress. He took the box from Hao's hands, deposited it carefully on the desk. "Let me kiss you?" Hanbin tasted like the wine they'd had, and he tasted like the cake they'd shared, and he tasted like he always did, but Hao was half drunk and Hanbin's kisses were hypnotic and he let himself be pushed against the mattress with no resistance at all. He kissed Hanbin like he wanted to swallow him whole, because every inch of air between the two of them felt like a violation, like it wasn't supposed to be there, like they should be one body alone. Hanbin was on top of him, and Hao was unbuttoning his shirt and he had very little idea what he was doing because the wine was making it all hazy, and unmistakably great. Hanbin exhaled against his collarbone.

"I'm kinda drunk," Hao admitted. Hanbin laughed against his skin. He kissed him on his neck, on the hollow where it met his collarbone. Hao giggled. "You're my favorite thing ever."

Hanbin propped himself on his hands, facing Hao fully. "Me too," he said. "Are we going to have drunk sex?" It should have made Hao want to say no, the way the question was poised, the stupidity of it, in itself. Yet.

"I think I'll like it," Hao replied. Hanbin sank against him once again, and Hao welcomed him, kissing him eagerly and promptly and with a desperation he didn't know he was harboring. It was ten times harder than usual to take off both pairs of pants at once, and Hao's coordination was failing so hard that he almost smashed his own nose against Hanbin's shoulder while they tried to get back to lie down. It made him laugh really hard, even if it hurt the tiniest bit. Hanbin's hands weren't clumsier than the other times, but his focus shifted from one thing to the other in waves, and one moment he was fingering Hao open, and the next one he was back to kissing him, with no logic. Hao loved him. He loved this messy version of him, too. Hao begged him to move it along, he heard his voice be so airy and filled with need that it should be embarrassing. When Hanbin entered him it was like it hit him belatedly, and he was suddenly full without realizing he was being filled. "God," he cursed. "Fuck me," he begged. Hanbin complied, and Hao did his best not to come embarrassingly fast, but it was a hard challenge. The volume of his voice must have been horrifying as he whined and whined and called Hanbin's name over and over. There wasn't a single coherent thought in his head. Only Hanbin, the way he felt inside Hao, the way his hands felt on Hao's hips, the way his hot mouth traced wet patterns over Hao's shoulders. Hao couldn't think. He could only cry out a prolonged groan when he finally came, while Hanbin kept going, buried deep inside him. Hao kept him close to himself, as Hanbin finished himself off.

"Tomorrow morning," Hao said, not too sure he was able to be understood. "I want a second round. Maybe a third."

"We have lunch with my family," Hanbin said. "You sure you can wake up early enough to do it all?" Hao punched him lightly.

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 3h ago

SHB sent texts:

merry christmas lovelies!

hope you spent it well!!

i went home to my parents and ate a lot too

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 3h ago

SM sent texts:

as usual, the guys organized a christmas party for me to feel like i did when i was in canada

our managers came too!!!

we'll upload photos asap :D

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now

20231225 Zhang Hao posts on Bubble

[TRANS]

I had a fun Christmas weekend!

What did you do?

Kuanjuiii

> *so?*

> *updates??*

janghao

> *my fucking head is killing me*

Kuanjuiii

> *who would have guessed huh*

> *how was the lunch? did they like the presents?*

janghao

> *they loved the frame, they made us take a photo all together saying they'll put it there :(*
> *it's interesting how i'll be exposed on a shelf full of family photos in the worst state i've been in months:*
hungover, with a headache, with a terrifying high-collared sweater too.
> *i hope no one will ever see this photo except for them*

Kuanjuiii

> *i take it the dinner went well too lol*

> *hanbin? his gift?*

janghao

> *he liked what i gave him a lot*
> *which, a relief!*
> *bought me like three kg worth of skincare stuff i'll show you wait*
> *[janghao sent a photo]*

Kuanjuiii

> *did you thank him properly? ;)*

janghao

> *well, yes.*
> *he was also almost late to go to church with his mom i felt terrible oh god*

Kuanjuiii

> *he did not go to church right after fucking you i hope*

janghao

>
> *semantically, he didn't.*
> *in a more general, less specific sense, though...*

Kuanjuiii

> *IS THIS HOW I FIND OUT THAT YOU TOP, TOO?*
> *HAO.*
> *AND MERRY FUCKING CHRISTMAS.*

janghao

> i HAD told you.

> you don't have information retention it's not my fault

> anyway

> i think the worst thing was that his sister was perfectly aware why he was late in the morning. like, she threw me this completely unimpressed glance when i showed up for lunch,,, and she told me that she assumed i'd slept well.

> i was like: huh, i did sleep well ha ha ha

> and she was like: please at least set an alarm next time, hanbin came home with barely dried hair.

> i told her that maybe he'd woken up late and she just stared at me for like three hours and then: i know you were together, why are you even bothering? there's a giant bruise on his neck.

Kuanjuiii

> how did you survive having lunch with them?

> i would have CRIED

janghao

> i mean

> she didn't bring it up with the parents at least??

> also i mean, weird as it is, but i don't think they think we don't touch each other.....

> let's stop it here.

Kuanjuiii

> but you like his family a lot

> like, that's such a great thing.

janghao

> i know, they're incredible

> kinda explains where he came from ngl

> being so easily loved makes everything incredibly easier

> i can't wait for them to meet my parents too, i won't lie

Kuanjuiii

> look at you, set for life

janghao

> mmmm

> i do think so.

Kuanjuiii

> shit, you're serious

janghao

> shit, i am.

Hanbin's hands were sweating. Taerae was sighing every three seconds, tired of his nervousness. He'd changed outfits five times before leaving home, before setting on his current one. "You've visited his family, how is his best friend scarier?" Taerae finally exploded.

He was right. Hao's mother was more terrifying, and she would be coming in two days. Somehow, he was safe in the knowledge that Hao's parents had realized that he really cared for their son even before it became the real thing. Chen Kuanjui, instead? His judgment terrified him. What if he saw him and started believing that Hao wasn't going to

be happy with him? What if he saw Hanbin and thought Hao could get someone better? What if they just didn't get along? Hao had insulted him, when he'd shared this worry with him, saying it was something nonsensical to worry about, that Kuanjui couldn't wait to meet him and had been his biggest supporter from day one. "Because he's kinda wild," he replied. "What if he thinks I'm too boring or too limiting for Hao?"

"What if it's up to Hao hyung to decide who he dates?" Taerae shot back. And, again, he was right. Hanbin nodded. He tried to think about something else, like the fact that there were a lot of people Taerae had invited to this party, including his whole band, which meant that he would have a chance with his crush, too.

"Are your bandmates curious about what it's going to be like to party with all these idols?" Not that they were these high-rise celebrities, but, still, if he'd been just a normal uni student he would have found this awesome.

"No," Taerae replied, cutting. "They rehearse with me all the time, they've met you all on various occasions because you can't stay home and have to visit me at the studio every damn time." Hanbin had visited him *once*, but he hadn't been able to live it down.

"Well, it wasn't a party, though," he tried to keep the conversation going.

Taerae gave him a level gaze. "Planning to turn into a previously unknown party animal, tonight?" He asked. God, Hanbin was always bullied. He hoped Taerae's crush would take him once and for all so he wouldn't have to deal with him any longer.

"Oh, your band's all here, they're like the first," even Matthew and Jiwoong had yet to show up. The four kids from Taerae's band were awkwardly unbuttoning their coats and jackets. Hanbin pushed Taerae to his feet. "Go. Be extra charming to your future husband, too."

"I'm not going to marry him," Taerae sounded indignant. "Not in a thousand years. He's fun and cute but that's it." Hanbin watched him go, watched him be hugged and patted on the back by all of them, and watched him stand as far as he could from the object of his affection. Unless this other kid got a move on, Taerae would go nowhere on his own. What a nerd.

It was insane, how quick people started to arrive after that. Taerae had outdone himself, inviting every single person he knew. The girls from his uni classes showed up in glittery outfits and shiny hair accessories. Hanbin was only waiting for Hao to get there with the others, and with Kuanjui. Only when this introduction would have gotten out of the way would he be relaxed enough to focus on the rest of their New Year party. The party itself looked like it would be fun enough, although nothing exceptional in terms of fanciness. Taerae had even asked for a small amount from each participant, in order to provide them all with drinks, and food. And music, because the DJ clearly needed to be paid with more than the promise of free drinks. "Can I get drunk tonight?" Gunwook asked, suddenly standing next to Hanbin. "I'm twenty in a few hours." Like Hanbin could've forgotten, with the sheer amount of times he'd repeated this same thing in the last few days.

"You're a bit too heavy to carry home if you get *too* drunk," Hanbin pointed out. "Plus, Gyuvin won't be happy to see you drinking, you know he has an aversion to it."

Gunwook sighed loudly, a childish pout on his face. How was he turning twenty, already? He was thirteen just yesterday, a tall teenager with a round face and thick glasses who wanted to catch up to people five years his senior in the span of three weeks. "He tolerates you and Hao hyung drinking, he'll tolerate me too."

Hanbin gaped for a split second. "First of all," he started, "it's not like me and Hao get drunk on the regular." Gunwook made a face. Hanbin knew he was in the right, anyway. Having a beer was different from getting drunk. Gunwook still needed to learn the difference, that was all. "And then, you're younger than him, so he'll want to be more strict with you."

"Why do you all want to parent me so bad?" Gunwook asked, a resigned set to his face and shoulders.

Hanbin's laughter took him, too, by surprise. "Because you're cute," he said, softly. Gunwook made a serious face, trying to look like a grown up. It didn't work. "Anyway, are your actor friends coming tonight?"

"Yup!" He smiled, finally. "Hyung," his face turned a bit serious once again. "I'm not complaining about the fact that you care about me," he stated, calmly. "I'll never do that. On the contrary, I'm happy our family grew bigger this year. I wanted to tell you before we all started celebrating and lost sight of each other." Hanbin didn't know what to say.

"Yah," he exhaled. "Yah, Park Gunwook." He felt his cheek catch fire. "Don't talk like this." Gunwook laughed, loud. He patted Hanbin's shoulder once, then he perked up at the sight of someone.

"Hyung, let me say hello real quick," he muttered. Once again, Hanbin was left to wait for Hao — and, most importantly, paradoxically, Kuanjui — to arrive. God, why were they so set on not arriving on time? If he thought too

much about it, he would start ripping his hair out from his scalp, one by one. There was Kuanjui, tonight, and then in three days, just before Hanbin and his group left for Japan, Hao's mom was coming to visit. And, of course, he'd already met her in the summer, but now things were *very* different, and- God. How do people stay in relationships without wanting to scream out all the time? And, of course, *of course*, none of this was truly too much, because it was something he was doing for Hao, and nothing he would ever do for Hao could be heavy or hard to bear. But if he stopped to think about it, if he really took into account the seven hundred declinations of anxiety and stress he'd felt to prove himself worthy of being with Hao, he wanted to cry. His therapist often berated him for thinking like that, saying he didn't have to prove anything to anyone, that, if he thought this way, then it meant that Hao, too, should be preoccupied with proving himself as a good boyfriend for him. Not that Hanbin was convinced of her reasoning, but he still understood that his own mindset wasn't productive.

He said hello to a lot of people, some of which he wasn't even sure he knew. He stopped to have a conversation with some students from Taerae's department, all previously unknown to Hanbin, but very nice people to talk to. And then, finally, Seungeon, Quanrui and Gyuvin showed up, and, after them, Hao. Hanbin's world always stopped whenever he saw Hao. Months might have gone by, years might go by, their whole life, too, and his breath would always catch in his throat, his eyes would see only him, his ears would ring with a static that could only tune back to reality when Hao finally met his eyes, too. Hanbin excused himself, as politely as he could, and he made his way to them.

"Hi," Hao said, and his face was so brightly happy — maybe just from seeing him, Hanbin hoped, and, honestly, he knew it was because of that. "We're sorry, we took a long time getting ready." Hanbin huffed a laugh. Hao lived with people that, as a whole, were all kinda obsessed with the way they looked. It must have been complicated to finalize their looks for the night. Hao looked stunning, not just because he always did, but because he'd styled his hair away from his face and he was wearing makeup and there was a choker on his neck that Hanbin shouldn't think about, for his own sanity. Hao was still looking at him, though, and Hanbin raised an eyebrow, questioning. "You look good," Hao said, succinctly.

"You look better than me," Hanbin replied, and he meant it. Hao's cheeks rounded up in a smile. Hanbin wanted to kiss him. It made his head spin, the way he wanted to just touch his mouth to his cheeks and leave kiss after kiss on his face. But there were too many people around them and there also was a threatening email on both their phones which read *the first leaked photo I spot on the Internet of the two of you being intimate with each other will result in dorm confinement for the two groups as a whole. Yes, during the holidays*. Their companies had been lenient lately, not stopping them from actually seeing each other, allowing for discreet outings too. But there was a line they shouldn't cross, apparently.

"Hey, lovebirds," someone called. Kuanjui. Oh, it was time for this. Hanbin half stiffened, forcing himself to relax immediately after. It was just Hao's best friend. What was there to be scared of?

"Maybe if you don't yell," Hao instantly shot back.

"People can see that you're a couple from three kilometers away," Kuanjui replied, but at least he'd softened his tone. "Hi," he faced Hanbin fully. "Chen Kuanjui, but you must know already. I'm *incredibly* pleased to finally meet you."

Hanbin shook his hand. "Hanbin," he just said. "And I'm really happy to meet you, too." The giggle that escaped Kuanjui was a bit chilling. Hanbin prayed that someone of his close friends would come to his help. Where was Matthew, for instance?

"He's more handsome, from up close," Kuanjui told Hao, making sure Hanbin could hear, too. "Why didn't you say so? He's also taller than I thought."

"Won't you stop being rude?" Hao looked pained. Hanbin forced down his laugh. "I have to introduce you to a lot more people, but please act normal." Hanbin had the impression that Kuanjui's concept of normality was a bit skewed from Hao's. This would make a fun evening. "Later," Kuanjui swatted him off. "Now, you go deposit your coat and mine and I'll be talking to your Hanbin for a couple seconds. Off you go," he dropped his woolen coat in Hao's arms and grabbed Hanbin's wrist to drag him a bit farther. Hanbin tried to exchange some kind of word with Hao, or a gaze at the very least, but he was being abducted with remarkable force and it felt rather inevitable.

"Hao-" he tried.

"I don't know either," was the only reply he could gather.

Kuanjui was too intimidating. There was no reason why a young man as lanky and thin as him could make someone like Hanbin this scared. "Alright," he started. His Korean was, honestly, spotless. It was hard to believe he

didn't live in Seoul anymore, Hanbin was rather admired by it. "I'm going to be revolutionary," Kuanjui stated. "I know for a fact that you've had at least more than two different shovel talks. I think that your own friends might have told *you* not to fuck with Hao in the wrong way. I'm here to do the opposite."

"To tell me to be horrible to Hao?" Hanbin was confused. "Because I don't think-

"What? No," Kuanjui laughed. "I'm here to assess you and the reasons why Hao shouldn't be horrible to *you*. I'm putting him back in his place, later." If possible, Hanbin was more confused.

"But he's not horrible to me," he confessed. "He's- He's *good*. He's a good listener and a good person, and he cares and-

"I asked about *you*," Kuanjui sing-songed. "But, actually, you don't have to answer any questions. I'm just informing you that I'm here to take your side."

Hanbin frowned. "I don't think there's any side to pick," he commented. "We're not breaking up any time soon," Kuanjui smirked. "And we're capable of solving our own disagreements."

"Oh, so you *do* have quarrels," he smiled. "Hao won't ever admit to it with me." Of course they had quarrels, what were they, bodhisattvas? They were usually about inconsequential things, though. "But, there will come a time where a bigger fight will ensue, I assure you."

"Does it have to?" Hanbin asked, maybe he sounded stupid. But, seriously, was it something inevitable in all relationships? Couldn't they just talk things out normally without any big drama? Jiwoong and Matthew never fought, for example. Couldn't they be like them?

Kuanjui looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Well, if you're actually planning to be with him forever, it's kinda unlikely you won't have a single fight." Hanbin was quickly humbled. Forever. It had always been implied when they first got together for real. It couldn't be anything else than lifelong love. But they'd never talked about it. Should they? Not that Hanbin thought they weren't on the same page. Just, they were taking every step in that direction without ever discussing it face to face. "Are you okay, man?"

"Yeah," Hanbin said. "I'd just never really thought about that," he admitted. "I haven't dated before," he also said. "And sometimes I feel like I overthink stupid things, and overlook more relevant ones."

Kuanjui sighed. His expression sobered up, too. Despite the glitter on his eyelids and the jewelry on his ears and neck, he wore the face of someone you could just meet in your same building, a warm and welcoming next-door neighbor. "No one teaches you how to be in a relationship. And, you know me, I'm not cut out for relationships, I avoid them." He let out a bitter smile. "Hao is an easy person to love, but he's a complicated person to have around when he's stressed. He doesn't talk about his things, you have to carve them out of him, and he'll get upset because you'll force him to open up. He will go out of his way to support you, but he won't accept the same thing from you, because you shouldn't waste your energies on him. He will take something the wrong way and he'll find a way to say it's your fault for not being clear enough with your intentions, instead of admitting he overreacted. This is the man you're going to be with, Hanbin. And I trust that you're the best person for him, because I trust him and, by extension, I trust you, too." Hanbin was a bit breathless. "But I want you to know that you can always reach out to me, so that I can simultaneously guide you through his moods and yell at him for making your life harder, okay?"

Hanbin was nodding. "Thank you," he said.

Kuanjui waved him off. Hanbin noticed that he wore nail polish. It made him smile. "Nah," Kuanjui shrugged. "I'm here for you, you won my best friend over, I'll help you to keep him, and keep him happy." He laughed. "Now, though, onto the serious stuff: who's hot here?"

It was its own kind of magic, how everyone started fitting around everyone else. Taerae's band, talking with Gunwook and Gyuvin for hours. Kuanjui, spending a lot of time talking to Matthew and Jiwoong together, and then finding himself involved in a game of darts with some of Taerae's friends from uni. Hao's company's juniors, who had walked into the party thinking no one would notice them but stuck out like a sore thumb because of how young they looked. Hanbin found himself talking to these kids at a certain point, and the silly way they were all just looking to get drunk more than to hang out with older artists made him laugh out loud. Hao dragged him to dance at a certain point, and then he brought him to get an iced drink to cool down and the only thing Hanbin could think about was that they were going to start the new year together, and it would be another year they would spend together, in a series of years like that. It filled him with such happiness he couldn't find the words to describe. Taerae's drummer only realized that night that Hanbin and Hao were dating, and his face would have deserved to be photographed. Taerae's laughter, too, was worthy of being immortalized.

"Can I talk to you, Hanbin sunbaenim?" Hanbin was brought back from his reverie-like observation of his friends.

Taerae's guitarist, fellow vocalist, and, mainly, his crush, was looking up at Hanbin with rounded eyes.

"Just me?" He asked back, because if this was about what he *hoped* it was about, maybe he needed some support. Hao, possibly.

The younger man shot a worried look around them. He was nervous. *Oh*. "Huh, like, if we can." Well, Hanbin could deal with this by himself, he was a grown-up. Nonetheless, he pulled at Hao's sleeve to signal to him that he was stepping outside for a second. Hao took in the situation rapidly, smiling at him and sending him a flying kiss. Once again, Hanbin fought the urge to step back and kiss him. Were they at least allowed a midnight kiss? Just one.

"It's about Taerae hyung," the kid blurted out, as soon as they stepped outside the party venue. It was freezing and they'd brought their coats but the contrast between the inside and the outside was too much.

"Wait," Hanbin stopped him. "We've never really talked before, Junhyeon-ssi, but can you please talk informally with me? You called me sunbaenim earlier and it's awful, just- just, don't."

"You know my name, hyung?" And, just like that, he'd converted to a whole different style.

"Well, yes? You're in a band with my friend, why wouldn't I know your name?" Hanbin laughed. "Go on, anyway. What about Taerae?"

Junhyeon sucked in a breath. His eyes shifted to the floor. "He's, huh. Is Taerae hyung into me?" The cheek this kid had? Hanbin's eyes shot wide open. "Like, in your opinion. Does he like me, in your opinion, hyung?"

Hanbin stalled. "Are you really asking my opinion, though?"

Junhyeon groaned lightly. He was nervously tapping his foot against the ground and he was fiddling with the hem of his left sleeve. "I don't know," he exclaimed. "I'm lost." And then, without giving Hanbin time to reply. "I thought he liked me, because he would always laugh at my shit, but then he isn't saying anything and he doesn't act all that differently with me than he does with the others, and maybe I'm just reading too much into it, because I want to feed my own delusions, so-

"Wait," Hanbin said, again. "You like him?"

"Well, duh?" Rude. "Why would we be here if I didn't?" Well, maybe to discuss how to turn Taerae down without hurting him? What was Hanbin supposed to know?

"Well, forgive me," Hanbin said. "I didn't know it was mutual." Oh, fuck. See, this is why he needed Hao to compensate for his own inability to deal with life.

"So he does?" Junhyeon's face had lit up. "Oh, thank god. Can I date him?"

Hanbin blinked. Then he laughed out loud. "Ask him? Why are you asking me?" Junhyeon was smiling really wide and happily. "Wait, though. Be careful with him, he's like a stray cat on this subject. Don't scare him off right at the start, please. But don't be shy, either, because he needs to be told things straight on."

"Hyung, it's all very nice and all," Junhyeon said, half in a hurry. "But it's almost midnight and I kinda need to kiss Taerae hyung right now." Okay? TMI. Hanbin raised his hands in the air, letting him go. "But thanks, I'll update you!" What the hell. What was Taerae getting himself into? Hanbin made his way back inside the venue, too.

He didn't get two steps inside and he was being pushed out of the door once again. Hao's strength was always surprising. Hanbin let himself be pulled by Hao, along the badly lit alley next to the hall, without asking anything. It was close to midnight, after all. Hao stopped where the light of the streetlamps couldn't reach them anymore. His hand lingered on Hanbin's arm. Hanbin brought a hand to his face. He didn't need to see to know how to touch Hao. The light from Hao's screen took him by surprise. He'd opened the clock app.

"Seven," he whispered. "Six. Five." Hanbin rubbed his thumb along his jaw. "Four." The light from the phone cast bright shadows on Hao's face. His eyelashes fanned his cheek so beautifully. "Three. Two." Hanbin wished it was the last time they had to hide their kisses from their people. "One."

Hao was kissing him before Hanbin could wish him a happy new year. His mouth was warm and soft and he was licking insistently at his lips. Hanbin parted his lips, he grabbed Hao's waist under his coat and pulled him closer. "Happy twenty-twenty-four," he whispered against his mouth.

"I love you," Hao replied. And it shouldn't make Hanbin's stomach turn with happiness, but it did. "Happy new year, jagiya." Hanbin hugged him tight, latching his chin over his shoulder.

"Let's spend it well," Hanbin muttered. "Let's be happy, and healthy, and let's love each other even more."

Hao's hands roamed across his back, caressing his muscles. "More than this?" Hao laughed. "It's not easy." Hanbin didn't reply. He stood there, in the dark, wrapped around the man he loved. And he soaked it all in.

"Let's wish a happy new year to all the others, or we'll raise a scandal with our disappearance," he said, after no

longer than twenty seconds. Hao let him go, with a nod and a kiss to his cheek. If they made their way back with their hands clasped together no one seemed to notice, and those who did kept their mouth shut and their phone cameras, too. It was good to notice that Taerae was nowhere to be seen, and that Kum Junhyeon wasn't in sight either. Hanbin would ask tomorrow. Now, though, he flung himself to hug Jiwoong, first, and then all the rest. If the year was starting like this, it couldn't be but a great one.

taerrorist

> *so i'm told i have to thank you*

hanbinsung

> *you're welcome*

taerrorist

> *we're not together or anything so don't start acting like you got me a boyfriend please*

hanbinsung

> *i didn't say: anything*

> *and i won't say: anything*

> *you're scary taerae*

taerrorist

> *:)*

> *anyway, are you home?*

hanbinsung

> *now? well yeah.*

> *we're all home*

taerrorist

> *you're the fun one at parties huh*

> *i'm coming back home btw, i just took the bus*

> *see ya soon*

hanbinsung

> *can i just ask where you slept*

> *won't bring it up ever again*

taerrorist

> *junhyeon is a normal person who has a home and a bed?*

> *like...*

hanbinsung

> *do you want this information to be known to park gunwook?*

taerrorist

> *FUCK*

> *no*

> *our son.*

> *let's leave him in the dark for now? if he asks tell him we crashed together with the band guys ok???*

> *shit.*

hanbinsung

> *why are you that shy?*
> *he knows when i'm at hao's*

taerrorist

> *hao's your official boyfriend with all the officiality of it*
> *i'm a heathen*
> *hooking up with people i don't have a relationship with*

hanbinsung

> *yet*

taerrorist

> *shut up.*

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — 12h ago

20240101 Hao texts on Bubble

[TRANS]

Happy new year!

Did you celebrate NYE with your close friends?

Oh, partners? No!

Don't love anyone that isn't me!!

Gyuvin made a point to kiss everyone on their forehead to wish a happy 2024

There was no escape

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — 3h ago

20240104 Hao texts on Bubble

[TRANS]

My mom came here!!!!!!!

She came to visit her son!!!

Give me restaurant recs so I can buy my mother a fancy dinner!!

Yes, even if they're expensive, it's my mom!

I want to eat soba :(

5stars translations @starsintranslation — just now

GW sent texts

we landed in japannnnnnnnnnn

hanbin hyung bought us soba noodles :D

that hyung is cute

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

do they think we're so stupid that they have to spell it out for us? like. next time tell us directly that your bf sent you a pic of what he was eating in japan it's less ridiculous

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

anyway i miss seeing them together where are theyyyyyy why don't they show up together anymoreeeee (have they spent NYE together? has bin met hao's mom when she visited? update us we care i swear)

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 5h ago

HB sent texts

mhhhhh what a great show!!!
we had a lot of fun omg
i hope we'll see each other soon
again or for the first time for those who couldn't see us today

bin <3

> *i forgot to tell youuuuuuuuu*
> *while we were on the phone lol*
> *i meant to tell you that taerae and gunwook got into a very serious karaoke competition and i'll have to show you the videos later*
> *now go to sleep, we'll talk tomorrow*

janghao

> *what if i want to talk to you now, too? huh??*
> *also bc my mom is still keeping me awake god i love her but i love living alone*

bin <3

> *are you still out???*
> *what are you doing out?*

janghao

> *no, we're in her hotel room*
> *i'll sleep here i think atp*
> *anywayyy*
> *she's trying to show me a TV show she thinks that will help her improve with korean*
> *she's "studying" it*
> *she said*

bin <3

> *what show?*
> *why did she pick up studying korean tho?*

janghao

> *honey, bc i'm dating you.*

bin <3

- > *she gave up on my mandarin?*
- > *she's right.*
- > *but my japanese is improving!*

janghao

> *yay for the colonizer's language!*

> *i'm joking btw*

> *and your mandarin's getting better bc i'm a wonderful teacher and i won't allow you to say otherwise*

> *i'm killing my mother brb*

bin <3

- > *what*
- > *hao?*
- > *hao??*

janghao

> *matricide postponed*

> *she calmed down and stopped changing the tv channel every 0.2 seconds*

> *it was like when you're sitting next to quanrui and he scrolls tiktok and the audio goes for two secs and then changes and he keeps doing that and i want to strangle him you know?*

bin <3

- > *.....okay*
- > *my roomie (matt) wants us to sleep now*
- > *let's talk later! byeee*

janghao

> *yep good night*

> *if you don't hear from me in the morning maybe i'll have been arrested and extradited to china who knows i'm not above murder i found out*

bin <3

- > *it's okay, i'll bring you food in prison too*
- > *i'm a supportive boyfriend*

janghao

> *thank YOU.*

Japan concerts wrap up successfully for 5stars

2024 02 12

Kim Se Eun for Media Updates Korea

Yesterday night I had the luck to attend the final date of 5stars Japan tour. The young singers made sure to leave the country with a bang, as the setlist for the final date was filled with breath-taking moments. Their energy is surely something to look out for and we can't wait for more dates in Korea, too. Their show puts out a variety of performances, excellent on all fronts, from the powerful vocals to the flawless dancing. The solo performances by the five members showcased their individual strengths but also made me reflect on how good they are at working in a team for their team stages, where all their differences apparently disappear to gift us a cohesive, solid front.

I can't wait to see them again!

5stars members controversial rainbow accessories

2024 02 13

Yet again, 5stars gets attention for their open support of the LGBT+ community. Not all their fans are happy with their statements, though. In this case, they made their way through the Incheon airport — coming back from a short Japan tour — donning rainbow-colored pins on their coats or bags.

Not satisfied with that, three of the members (with the exclusion of Sung Hanbin and Kim Jiwoong) posted the pins on their messaging app.

A fan wrote “I don’t know what to think, what do they want us to say?” and her opinion was shared by many. Others rose to support the idols taking a stand in the civil rights controversy, but a majority of comments on social media were confused and perplexed. What do they mean with the pins?

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 1h ago

HB sent texts

heh we’re back!!
it was a good tour!!
we’re happy to be back!!

ah the rainbow!! wasn’t it cute? we all matched!!
we wore them bc at the fanmeeting after the concerts a lot of fans showed up with rainbow-themed gifts for us and thanked us a lot too so we thought we could do that for them!

as expected, gunwookie explained it better lol

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 1h ago

GW sent texts

can i send a longer text?
it’s about the pins
there are articles going around and i read them so i hope they read me too!

okay i was also authorized by staff so it’s alright don’t worry about me <3

how to start...

We can’t quite ignore the issue at play, I guess. So, our group has been an object to some nasty comments for a while because of that, you know? The hyungs are especially nice about it and i have such high esteem of them, because i wouldn’t be as patient as they are.

Anyway, we held some fanmeets after our concerts and there were a lot of people who tried to discuss with us our impact in that direction, how much more understood and welcomed they felt in their communities, in their schools or families, all because of us.

We talked this out among ourselves, because some of us didn’t feel like they deserved such high praise, as, honestly, we hadn’t done anything special. So, we decided to try to repay their support and trust in us by showing more open support. We’re all adults and we’re conscious of what we say and do, and we discussed this action (which, genuinely, shouldn’t even have this much resonance) with our managers and staff and we all agreed that the best course of action would be to show up with these pins. And we bought them and wore them.

Sincerely, I don’t understand the uproar about it. We have always shown support for the theme, it is something that we live directly. And when we saw people being so touched by the bare minimum we’d done (and I’m not talking about Hanbin hyung, I’m talking about myself, mainly, as I was told: You’re a great person for not shying away from your friend like that, but isn’t it the basis of human decency?), we realized that we should do even more.

I know I talked a lot. Please don't misunderstand me. We don't think we've done a lot, we think that we should do even more, if anything. We'll do more. This is just the start, at least for me.

If some of you are disappointed, I can't force you to support us, though I wish we can listen to each other and exchange our ideas. I love you all, through it all.

hao ♥

- > *did gunwook lose his mind?*
- > *does he have something on your CEO?*
- > *why would h go out with something like that?????*

hanbinsung

- > *he was ADAMANT*
- > *no way to dissuade him i swear*
- > *ji ara APPROVED it before he sent it???*
- > *idk*

hao ♥

- > *what the fuck?*
- > *that bitch doesn't want me to see you if a person with so much as eyes is in our proximity but now she looks like this super supporter of gay people i hate her*
- > *but i love gunwook, though. give him a little kiss from me. on his hair if you can.*

hanbinsung

- > *no fr the way i HATE her.*
- > *"make sure to mention we all agreed to your gesture"*
- > *Y'ALL DIDN'T!!!! YOU DIDN'T KNOWWWWW*
- > *anyway. kiss transmitted.*

hao ♥

- > *when can we meet?*
- > *ask ji ara for permission after you met me too, seems like a valid strategy*
- > *come over tonight?*

hanbinsung

- > *tonight?*
- > *can't you come over? i'm a bit tired from the flight*

hao ♥

- > *and your roommates?*

hanbinsung

- > *we need to switch dorms.*
- > *we can't live like this.*
- > *@ji ara: rent us a larger flat*

hao ♥

- > *it's fine baby*
- > *i'll see you tomorrow, i'm coming over in the morning then*
- > *i can wait ten more hours to see you (but i'll suffer immensely)*

hanbinsung

- > *i'll repay your sacrifice*
- > *you know tomorrow's valentine day, right?*

hao ♥

- > *of course i know*
- > *tomorrow you're sleeping over here, won't take no as an answer.*

hanbinsung

- > *i shouldn't have unpacked*
- > *see you in the morning*

Hao didn't know how they ended up like that, it was a mid-March morning, and they were sitting in Hao's kitchen. There was no one else at home, which was why Hao was only wearing his underwear and no pants, and Hanbin was donning a tank top over his sweatshorts. Two matching cups of tea were between them. Hanbin was biting at his nails.

"Stop doing that," Hao scolded him. He sounded a bit angry. Well. He was a bit angry. Hanbin let his hand fall down back on the table, with a dull thump. Hanbin didn't say anything. Hao kept silent, too. In his plans, by now he would already be taking a shower to clean himself up while Hanbin still lay in his bed, maybe gathering both their discarded clothes. Instead, they'd stopped halfway because Hanbin had chosen that moment, out of all, to tell him the tour news. So they would be away for a whole month without going back to Seoul at any point in the meantime. So he would spend his birthday away from Hao. Hanbin had had the *wonderful* idea to top it all off by saying, *Hey, don't be too upset, Taerae will be away from Junhyeon, too, for his birthday*. As if it was supposed to help Hao. Honestly, who the fuck cared about Taerae and Junhyeon. Hao was already planning stuff for Hanbin's birthday. A trip, maybe, for the first free day. And now he had to deal with the fact that Hanbin would be in fucking North America with the highest time difference there could be. On the other hand, it wasn't Hanbin's fault. They couldn't postpone tour dates for the sake of celebrating birthdays.

"What do you want me to do?" Hanbin asked.

"I want you to stop asking useless questions," Hao replied, in a split second. Hanbin sighed, loud. Hao echoed him.

"I should've told you at a different time," Hanbin voiced. "I'm sorry I spoiled our morning, I know you have work later and this ruined everything. I failed to--"

"Can you shut up?" Hao's frustration was only growing. "I'm clearly overreacting and you're making me feel like I'm an asshole and I know it's not your fault, nothing is. I'm just- I should be happy you're going to America on a tour, I shouldn't be whining because I don't get to wish you a happy birthday one on one."

"I didn't mean to make you feel like an asshole," Hanbin said. God, Hao didn't know how to talk, at this point. "And you have a right to be upset."

"Aren't you upset? Why aren't you? I reacted in the worst way ever, and you're not even upset about it?" Hao didn't understand. There were tears burning at the back of his eyes.

"I'm not happy about it, clearly," Hanbin replied. Hao wanted him to get angry. To yell at him. "Hao," his voice was too soft for the moment they were having.

"No," Hao cut him off. "What's wrong with us? I'm incapable of being rational and you're everything but irrational, can we fight normally? Like, yell at me, I'll yell at you and we'll be done with that." Hao looked away.

Hanbin huffed a laugh. What was funny? There wasn't anything funny in how Hao was feeling. "Do you want me to yell at you? Should we make it a whole scene?"

It *wasn't* funny. "No," Hao admitted. "But I kinda want to insult you for picking the worst moment ever to tell me

about this.”

Hanbin got up. His hands found Hao’s shoulders, and he started massaging the tension out of his neck, too. “Then do that. Insult me. Then I’ll swear at you, too, because you’re childish and you don’t like it when things don’t go to plan.” Hao scoffed. Hanbin’s hands on his shoulders were amazing.

“You’re frustrating, Hanbin,” he said, after a few seconds. “You don’t even let me be upset with you. You want to talk about things, and I want to sulk.”

“I don’t want to send you to work sulking,” Hanbin commented. “And, honestly, I don’t want to leave now. We have some time left this morning, do we want to use it for a fight?”

“It’ll come a day when I will inevitably yell at you,” Hao said, a strong knot forming in his stomach. Hanbin’s lips touched his temple. He didn’t move away for a long time. Hao pressed his eyes closed. He shouldn’t cry.

“You’ll yell, and you’ll apologize about it,” Hanbin said, softly. “And sooner or later it’ll be my turn to be angry and take it out with you, and then I’ll have to come back with my tail between my legs and beg for your forgiveness. Areum and I used to hit each other all the time, we called each other all the insults ever. She started studying Japanese to use new swear words on me. I’m used to fighting with those I love. It doesn’t prevent me from loving them,” Hao grabbed his hand with his own, brought it over to his lips and planted a kiss on his palm. Hanbin laughed softly next to his ear.

“Are you really not upset because my first reaction wasn’t to be happy about the tour?” Hao asked for confirmation.

Hanbin’s lips touched his neck. He shivered. He ran a hand through Hanbin’s hair. “I expected a happier answer, it’s why I told you. But I understand your point of view, Hao. I’d love to spend every important day with you, too. We’ll find a way to celebrate together,” he promised. Hao moved his chair back, turning to face Hanbin again.

“Let’s go somewhere before you leave for America,” he finally said. Hanbin’s smile was as warm as opening the blinds on a lazy summer morning and finding out the sun’s been up for hours. Hanbin nodded. Hao would make it up to him, somehow. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Me too,” Hanbin replied in kind. Hao pulled him in for a hug, wrapping his arms around his waist. Hanbin let his head rest on top of Hao’s head. They were okay, right? This only meant that they would grow stronger together, right?

“You don’t hate me, right?” Hao asked, his voice muffled against Hanbin’s stomach.

“I couldn’t,” Hanbin assured him. He let a couple of seconds pass. “Do *you* hate me?”

Hao moved back with an indignant squeak. “Don’t be stupid, Hanbin,” he said, chastising. Hanbin laughed. The ass. Hao turned back to their neglected cups of tea. He sipped some of his. It was awful, and now it was cold, too. “This tastes horrible. We’re never making tea again while fighting. Why did we even do that?”

“I had to keep my hands busy while you scowled at me,” Hanbin explained easily. Hao laughed out loud, which put an even brighter smile on Hanbin’s face. God, it had all been so stupid. He got up, too, hugging Hanbin again. He inhaled his smell, the perfume still lingering on his skin, the shampoo in his hair. Hao wasn’t going to ever be able to live without him.

“Can we go back to bed?” Hao muttered. “I think I need to apologize better.”

Hanbin’s laugh was bright and sharp. “I’m not saying no,” Hanbin breathed. “But not because you need to apologize. Just say you want to, and I’d still be up for it.” Jesus, this man.

“Fine,” Hao was still tangled with him, in the middle of his kitchen. “Let’s go back to bed,” he started again. “I feel like blowing you, with no hidden agendas. I just want to get you off.”

Hanbin swallowed loudly. “How can you say-” he stopped. “You’re shameless.” And then. “Yes, anyway.”

There were days when Hao wished they had a less hectic routine. They were a lot of days, to be honest. Naturally, hectic-ness meant that they should be happy with their growth, of how both their groups had reached a bigger success than they’d even hoped for, of how they were often invited on TV or to take part in concerts in associations with other artists, too. Hao himself was busy with talks of a sort of variety show he would get to host together with Seungeon, if the production actually agreed to it. They were supposed to go around and try different free-time activities in the city, nothing original, all in all, but their team thought that people would enjoy watching it. At the same time, it meant that getting to see Hanbin was a nightmare. There were weeks where they had entire days off at the same time and it was amazing, and weeks where the most they could get was a couple of hours in the middle of a random weekday. If he thought about living like this for the foreseeable future, he wanted to crawl under his bed covers and never move again. It wasn’t like he thought their relationship would suffer because of the short time they could spend together, he had faith in the feelings they had for each other, and he knew, god he knew, that they would be able to last for much longer

than their careers as idol singers. The point was that he wanted more. More time with Hanbin, more chances to just spend time together without having to put into motion an elaborate plan to make transportation timetables fit with work schedules and with private needs such as sleep and family visits. More boring meetings where they just did nothing together, instead of having to visit each other on sets and in recording studios all the time, constantly watched by curious eyes and often berated for being in the way of technicians and make-up artists. More stupid squabbles over who had to wash dishes this time instead of tired conversations over the phone about who was supposed to kick out roommates for a glimpse of normal intimacy. Hao wanted all that, he wanted the small things that the concept of a life together entailed, he didn't want the macroscopic displays of love people might dream of. He didn't care about rings on their fingers, about kisses on national broadcast, about interviews about their love. He wanted the feeling of their hair smelling like the same shampoo, of their clothes getting mixed up in their respective wardrobes, of their belongings invading each other's spaces. He wanted the warmth of an early morning embrace and of a late-night conversation in front of a cup of tea, with their legs tangled on a couch and a forgotten TV drama playing in the background. He wanted the small, still intense, excitement of finishing a novel and pushing it in Hanbin's hands telling him to please read it as soon as he could, as fast as he could because he had to tell him all about it but he didn't want to spoil it for him. He wanted the smell of half-burnt food on the stove, forgotten because they'd both been distracted by something inconsequential, like making a shopping list, or sharing a soft kiss that had turned into something more.

There was a scenario that would make it easier to live like this, but Hao knew that it was too soon to bring it up with Hanbin. So he waited, and, as he waited, he browsed rental listings, trying to find something that could make Hanbin say yes to this insane request. They were too young, too, if he really thought about it, but who cared, honestly, when he was already completely sure about their future. Hao had talked it over with his father, because he was the only person who he trusted not to tell anyone else, not even his mother. "How were you able to understand that it would be something lasting, with mom?" he'd asked, over the phone, one warm afternoon, in late April, while he waited for Seungeon to come out of a screen test for their still-not-confirmed TV show. "Like, why did you two get married, how did you know you wouldn't break up, like, three years later?"

Hao's father had let out a surprised sound. "Well, it's not science," he'd replied. "You just know." Completely unhelpful. "And I also thought that if I had to put in a lot of work for a person, I wouldn't mind it if it was her."

Hao looked down at the traffic, from his place on the rooftop terrace of their entertainment company. "But I will never know if someday we'll drift apart, right?"

His father was quick to reply. "Xiao bu dian, that's why people talk about commitment, though. If you commit yourselves to each other, drifting apart shouldn't be a natural outcome."

"It's just," Hao liked the vertigo that came with looking down at the cars driving fast and tidily along the crowded lanes. "I feel like it shouldn't be this easy to just know I want to be with him forever."

"Why should it be hard?" His father asked. "Love is supposed to be easy, it's supposed to make you feel at home and to make you feel like yourself. It's not supposed to be complicated and tragic. That's the trashy TV you and your mother like, it's not real life."

Hao laughed. "I'm going to ask Hanbin something," he started. "When we're back from the trip."

His father let out a soft whistle. "Does it involve rings?" Silly man.

"No, of course not," Hao explained it all to him. His father gave him better advice than he could ever have dreamt of. There was a proud undertone to his voice, too, as if he was keeping to himself just how much he liked to have these conversations with his son, just how much he loved him, too. Hao wished he could hug his dad, right now, as a thank you for all the things he wasn't telling him.

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now
20240426 Hao Airport Shot.

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — just now
20240426 Hao posts on Bubble.

[TRANS]

Yoooo I'm going on a trip to meet my friend in Taipei!

I have so many activities lined up there with him!!!

Do you know that my friend dances in a ballet company??

He's a cool friend!

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

I DIDN'T THINK WE WOULD SEE THE DAY WHEN HAO MANAGED TO GO VISIT HIS DAMN BEST FRIEND WE'VE BEEN HEARING ABOUT FOREVER!!!!

stream 5stars @wishuponastar — just now

@ireonaimawake can you please tell me the lore about this bff? i'm not caught up.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

@wishuponastar of course!!!! hao's always talked about this kid who was a trainee with him back in the days, then one day he revealed that his friend (he actually always referred to him as his own brother back then) had moved back to his homeland.

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

@wishuponastar only sometimes they would exchange likes and comments on their IGs and so we knew that this other kid had been hired as a ballet dancer in taipei (?) but they were still friends. (he always left likes on haobin photos too, which kinda defused the scorned ex theories)

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

@wishuponastar anyway he went back to korea for the holidays (from his IG stories) but hao was never featured in the photos (but i mean they must have been together at a certain point) and now if he's flying to taiwan he's surely meeting him i guess

stream 5stars @wishuponastar — just now

@ireonaimawake you're an encyclopaedia of aw4ke facts how are you so well informed (thanksss)

just a girl on the internet @ireonaimaw4ke — just now

@wishuponastar people will call me jobless and mentally ill but i know it's a superpower! (i'm also actually employed) lol

bin <3

> *room number?*

janghao

> 548

> *the receptionist should know about your arrival btw*

Hanbin had never hated a taxi ride as much as he was hating this one. It was taking forever. He wanted to get to the hotel and take a shower and wait for Hao to be back from his visit to some temple or other. He and 5stars as a whole had just been, again, to Japan for a variety show recording, and, while the others had flown back to Seoul, he'd just

elected to worsen his carbon footprint and take *another* flight from Seoul to go and join Hao in Taipei. Flying directly from Tokyo would've been impossible, people would have noticed him not being in Seoul with the rest of his group (why people felt the need to wait for them in airports was a whole different mystery), so there he was, exiting the Incheon airport, just to drive straight to the Gimpo one. He'd slept the entire flight to Taipei, his face mask tight and his baseball cap pulled low, in the hope that no one on his flight paid such close attention to him as to notice that he hadn't even changed his clothes from his previous flight to this. He kept his head low as he crossed the arrivals section, picking up his suitcase without striking a conversation with anyone. As soon as he caught a taxi, he made sure to text his manager that he'd survived the whole thing unscathed. *Great*, had been Seokjae's reply. *Now please relax*. Yeah, a nice suggestion, if the fucking highway from the airport to the city center hadn't been blocked by some combination of traffic and car accidents.

"First time in Taiwan?" The taxi driver asked in pretty understandable English.

"Yeah," Hanbin mentally imposed himself to be nice to him. "I'm meeting a friend," he half-explained.

"Ah," the driver seemed satisfied, for a while. "Where are you from?"

"Korea," Hanbin replied, and he prayed that this man had no idea of the reason why he was adamantly keeping his face mask pulled up.

"Ah," he repeated. "Are you on a holiday?"

"Yes," Hanbin said, and the car finally gained some speed. "I'm going to be here for six days." The taxi driver nodded.

"It's not enough time for a holiday," the driver smiled, through the rearview mirror. "Why did you come to Taiwan for your holiday?"

Hanbin thought that he'd already told him he was visiting a friend. But, still, he answered again. "My boyfriend," he said it in English, which felt weird, unusual. "He wanted to visit a friend, so he flew out earlier. I'm joining him. Them, to be fair."

The driver didn't say much. "Have you been together long?" He just asked. Hanbin guessed it wasn't unusual for him to talk about this, with it being a much more open country on the subject and with the job he did. Who knew the kinds of people he got to talk to.

"Seven months," he replied. "More or less," he added, because they kept debating whether they should actually accept their agencies' meddling as the start of it all.

"Not long," the driver said. Hanbin nodded. "Do you live with him?"

Hanbin understood that he just wanted to make this endless ride go by faster, but, boy, was he nosy. "Uh," he hesitated. "Not yet?" If he was fair, it was kinda obvious they should. Just, seven months into a relationship, it looked a bit too soon. If they adopted the agencies' computation, though, it would look much more acceptable. "Maybe soon."

"You should get married here," ah, the usual marketing strategy of taxi drivers for their country's marvels. "Not now, later."

Hanbin laughed. "Who knows," he just said, and he checked on his phone for any update from Hao. "Life is long."

The receptionist at the hotel directed him to an elevator, which took him to the fifth floor. The keycard in his hand felt heavy, despite its irrelevant weight. Their team at the company hadn't been very supportive of Hanbin's initiative to go on a trip of his own, mostly because there wouldn't be much alone time involved. He wasn't doing anything wrong, though, and he knew that. Nonetheless, it felt huge. It was Hao and him, abroad, together. This time there were no parents involved, no press to satisfy: it was just the two of them and a whole week together. An entire week. Hanbin ran through the things he would do upon stepping in the hotel room: unpacking and sending a few items to the laundry service, taking a quick shower, waiting for Hao to come back and having dinner together, hearing about everything he'd been up to in the too many days they hadn't seen each other, being showed the photos from the places he'd visited. He was already calculating how many clean shirts he actually had left, while he pressed the keycard against the padlock. The door unlocked with a quiet beep, he pushed it open and pushed his suitcase through it, but it hit something. Hao's hands pulled him in immediately. He was already here? Hanbin stepped into his hug in a split second, closing the door behind himself.

"You're here," Hao murmured. Hanbin wrapped his arms around him, feeling him melt against his chest. His Hao. "I wanted to pick you up at the airport," Hao said. "I couldn't think about anything else but you flying in today." He pressed his lips against Hanbin's neck. A shiver ran through Hanbin's spine, he didn't let go of his hold on Hao. Hao's hands carded through his hair, pushing off his hat, letting it fall to the ground. His breath against his neck tickled. Hanbin hadn't even looked at him properly.

“Did you dye your hair?” He asked, and his voice was softened by Hao’s shirt against his face and by the mask he still had to take off. In order to free himself of it he would have to take his hands away from Hao, though. So it could wait. “Can I look at your new hair color properly?”

“In a minute,” Hao replied, hugging him even tighter. Hanbin let him have his way. It wasn’t a first, he would do anything Hao asked of him, he would never be able to tell him no, and he only ought to be grateful for the fact that Hao never took advantage of this fact for things too out of pocket. It shouldn’t be possible to miss someone the way Hanbin had been missing Hao these last two weeks. How he was going to survive the next months of tours and diversified activities was a question he refused to ask himself.

Hao’s grip on him softened, Hanbin stepping back just by the bare minimum. “You look so good,” he breathed out. The dark red hue of Hao’s hair suited him too much, even in the bare light of their hotel room, even with the least eye-catching shirt he owned, he looked like the superstar he was always supposed to be. Hao’s smile was almost shy. Hanbin knew he was staring at his mouth, he couldn’t quite help it. Inevitable as it always felt, he kissed Hao. Hao pulled him against himself, making the both of them stumble through the hotel room until Hao bumped into the bed frame. Hanbin’s breath hitched, Hao kissed him again, his hands tangled in Hanbin’s cardigan, pulling him down until he was kneeling with his knees on either side of Hao’s thighs. “Hao,” he detached himself. “Hao, I need to shower, it’s kind of a necessity.” Hao’s eyes were a bit too round and dark. He blinked, and his mouth looked red, and there was a trail of saliva on his lower lip down to his chin.

Hao nodded. His hands trailed up to Hanbin’s shoulders, pushing his cardigan down. Hanbin let out a light chuckle. Undressing for a shower like this was certainly a first, with Hao peeling off his clothes with trembling fingers, with his touch lingering on Hanbin’s skin every chance he got. Hanbin’s own hands never left Hao’s waist, his hips, slipping under his T-shirt, brushing his warm, soft, skin. The silence between them was charged with the light breaths they exhaled, answers to their touches. Hanbin got up to his feet, his jeans falling to the ground and, when he stepped towards the bathroom, Hao took a single step and then he stopped. “Hanbin-ah,” he whispered, in a question that was also a prayer. Hanbin extended a hand in his direction. He watched Hao’s Adam apple bump up and down, and Hao took his hand in his own, meeting Hanbin’s gaze.

Hanbin’s skin was too tight and too small to fit inside of itself everything Hanbin was feeling. Hao’s closeness in the cramped bathroom was enough to make Hanbin’s lungs contract with the electricity passing between the two of them. He stepped under the water spray, Hao’s eyes glued to his upper body. “Aren’t you coming?”

Hao blinked rapidly. He looked transfixed as he slipped his T-shirt over his head, his underwear down his legs. “Pass me the shampoo,” he ordered Hanbin, his security fake and superimposed on a visible nervousness. Hanbin obeyed, watching him pouring it on the palm of his hand. Hao reached over to put his hands in Hanbin’s hair. “Lean in a bit, won’t you,” his voice was half swallowed by the water. Hanbin let him wash his hair, let him lather the soap on his shoulder and his back, only touched him back above the waist in an unspoken rule they’d just set. Whenever the water hit Hao’s hair it came away a bit red, turning the floor a pinkish translucent. Turning the shower off, Hao smiled at him. His cheeks were pink with the warmth of the water, his eyes soft in the expression he often wore around Hanbin. “How tired are you?”

Hanbin failed to hold back laughter. “I’m not,” he lied.

“Two flights, a traffic jam, and you’re not tired,” Hao caught him out instantly.

“I’m really not,” Hanbin repeated. “And we can sleep in tomorrow,” he added. “And I kinda want…” he left it vague on purpose. Hao pushed a towel against his stomach.

“Me too,” he also said. “Your pick, though.”

Hanbin didn’t need to be told twice. They fell back on the mattress in a matter of seconds, their hair still completely wet, dripping on the bed covers in a maddening pattern. Hao looked up at him, adjusting the pillows under his shoulders. Hanbin pressed his hands to his thighs, angling him how it better suited him. Hao’s loud groan when he brought his mouth to the soft skin of his groin sent an electric jolt down Hanbin’s stomach. Every time he could touch him like this, Hanbin ascended to a new level of happiness. Knowing it was him who brought out the most pleased sounds of Hao was an accomplishment as high as he would ever get. Having the reward of Hao’s shivers and little tremors whenever he pushed yet another finger inside of him was the best prize he could ask for. Hao was clenching around his hand at every push, his breath struggling to form Hanbin’s name. “You’re a monster,” Hao whined. “You’re killing me.” Hanbin paused, focusing on Hao’s face. He looked so good, though. There were tears welled in his eyes, there was a red blush from his neck up, violent. “Get on,” Hao begged. “Stop teasing.” Hanbin tried to move back. Hao’s thighs trapped him, closing around his torso. He cast a look at Hao’s muscles, forcing him not to slide away, keeping him where he was. His hand ran up the back of Hao’s right thigh, wrapping itself around it, falling still on his

knee.

“Hao,” he called, his voice coming out a bit roughed. Hao was looking at him with a rapt expression. He was dragging his gaze all across Hanbin’s face with utmost slowness, lingering wherever it pleased him. Hanbin felt himself catch fire. He had no business feeling this alive under his stare. Hao pushed himself up just by the smallest bit, and it was like he couldn’t escape the pull that called him towards Hanbin’s mouth. Hanbin leaned towards him, and they were kissing again, hot and uncoordinated, and Hao’s breaths felt like desperate sobs in the way they made Hanbin feel like he had to keep kissing him, he couldn’t stop, or they would die, they would disappear. Hao guided him to kiss his neck, his shoulder, his chest. Hanbin complied, he let his lips touch everywhere Hao wanted him to, sucked his skin between his teeth and bit softly on his chest, as Hao whimpered and cursed and caressed his hair, calling him in a combination of bad words and sweet names. His Hanbin, he said. His love, an asshole, his life, a bastard, a bitch, his world, his love, yes, his love, shit, asshole. Hao’s voice stuttered when Hanbin pushed into him, his eyes widening, and his mouth going slack for a split second as Hanbin went as deep as he could. Then Hao smiled at him, around a soft moan. Hanbin kept looking at him as long as he could, while he also kept up the best rhythm he could. He knew what Hao liked, he knew just what drove him to the right amount of insanity. He knew how Hao enjoyed the drag inside of himself to be not quite slow, not quite fast. He knew how he didn’t want to have to turn his own hips upwards for Hanbin to hit the right spot, so Hanbin had to support his legs at the right angle for it.

Hao’s fingernails were scratching Hanbin’s back, his shoulders, where he tried to hold on to. Hao’s cock had been leaking for a while, Hanbin had realized it, but Hao wasn’t letting go easily, it seemed. Hanbin slowed down. Hao’s smile looked a bit drunk. He fixed their angle a bit, and Hao ran his hands along his nape. “You’re so pretty,” Hao said, and his last syllable turned into a sort of a sob because Hanbin had pushed back into him. “I want to look at your face all day long,” Hao said, completely out of his mind. Hanbin gave another push. Hao’s groan was too loud, by far. What if there were people in the rooms next to theirs? Hao was half sobbing, half giggling, when Hanbin thrust inside him once more. He couldn’t last. He wouldn’t last. Hanbin was done, this was all he could do today. He needed to come, he couldn’t- he moved back, ready to wrap a hand around himself for the final touch he needed. Hao met his eyes. “Do it inside me,” he said. Hanbin didn’t have the time to think about the mess that would entail. He was kissing Hao and he was coming, and Hao was also desperately jerking himself off, and, honestly, Hanbin needed to catch his breath.

“Did you remember we still had to buy dinner?” He asked Hao, after. “I just remembered, I’d totally forgotten.”

Hao groaned, turning on his side to face him, both of them lying on the mattress, their hair once again wet from a second shower. “Let’s just have room service this time,” he suggested. “We’ll do better tomorrow,” he also promised. Hanbin nodded at him.

Hao was going to be the most obnoxiously incompetent hiker ever. Hanbin and Kuanjui, combined, were two outdoorsy monsters, who kept telling him “just five more minutes” when it clearly was longer than that, they’d been on the same trail of this fucking national park for *hours*, for days, forever. They would die there, worn over by hunger and thirst, and desperate for their stupid decision to just visit the park together. Hao had known Hanbin was a sporty lover of the open air, but this was too much, this was where their codependency hit a limit, this was where he would say: my love, you go hiking and climbing mountains, i’ll wait for you at home with a face mask on and a cup of cocoa. But no, he’d been persuaded by Kuanjui’s cute smile, by his lovely insistence that they would pick a beginner’s trail, something even grandparents were good at.

“Also, you spend a lot of time in the gym,” Kuanjui had added, with a wink. “What ill could a walk do?” Hao *hated* sweating, he hated the insects plastering themselves on his skin, him having to swat them away as he also had to keep the coordination necessary not to fall in a bush or, worse, in a crevasse.

“It’s not like we’re hiking in the Alps,” Hanbin had laughingly pointed out when he’d said this out loud. “It’s a slope as gentle as you’ll find. I actually wanted to ask if you’d like to go with Areum and me to do the Jirisan trek, three days, as soon as I’m back from tour, but, at this point, maybe I’ll just go with her.”

Hao looked at him, stopping mid step, his — very light, Hanbin was carrying most things — backpack hitting his back suddenly. “You’ll go on a three-day hike after a month and a half in the States,” he said, deadpan. “What about me?”

Hanbin laughed out loud, pulling him to keep up with him and Kuanjui. “I’ll be with you and *then* I’ll go with Areum-ie,” he explained. “My sister begged me to go with her,” he added, and Hao knew that Hanbin’s sister was a sort of athletic monstress, great at whatever physical activity you could come up with. He also knew that her brother would

always say yes to her, so he just shrugged.

“Maybe if I start training now I could survive a three-day disgrace like that,” he muttered. “Why couldn’t your sister be into spas and beauty treatments, we could’ve gone, like, to get nose fillers together.”

Kuanjui’s laughter was sharp and bright. “Do you get nose fillers, Hao?” He chose to reply.

“Well, no,” Hao said. “But, just to do something with Hanbin’s sister I would’ve.” Hanbin threw him an amused smile, but he didn’t say much more.

Hao pushed a sweaty lock of hair away from his forehead. Come to think of it, he didn’t think he would be able to endure three days of this. If you love them, let them go, after all. Hanbin could go with Areum. He could live three more days without him, if the price to pay to be with him was to sweat twenty-four hours a day on a mountain trail with a backpack on their back, having to sleep in tents and possibly begging for God to take him out at every slight altitude variation. No, thanks.

“So,” Kuanjui said, like this walk was nothing for him. “I got you two tickets for my show tomorrow night,” yes, maybe by tomorrow night Hao would have found the will to live again. How much more would they have to walk, he was going crazy. “It’s an easy affair, there shouldn’t be any problems concerning your *fame*,” he wiggled his eyebrows. “But, feel free to get in a couple minutes later and go out a couple minutes earlier if you so prefer.”

Hanbin turned back to look at them, him being a few steps ahead, on the edge of a bend. He was sweaty, too, of course, but, unlike Hao, he looked happy and relaxed, and the bright smile on his face was the perfect match for his reddened cheeks. Hao’s chest swelled with affection, looking at him like that. So, maybe not the three-day torture, but a few daily treks. He might be able to endure them if they made Hanbin so happy. “I mean,” Hanbin said, comfortably, “everyone knows that Hao’s here, so the problem’s just me.” Hao scoffed, loud. What problem. “I’ll just try to go unnoticed.”

“Yeah, because you’re not tall and handsome and absolutely eye-catching,” Hao muttered. Kuanjui’s laugh was breathless, this time.

“What the fuck, man,” he said. Hao didn’t feel guilty. He’d said the truth. “Literally, keep it in your pants, I don’t need to be a part of this.”

Hao slapped him on his nape, roughly. “Your dirty mind needs to be fixed,” he said, and maybe he really meant it, because, really, half the things Kuanjui interpreted lewdly were actually pretty innocent.

“You’d get along spectacularly with Taerae,” Hanbin commented, unbothered. “Also, we’re almost to the final point. There’s the lodge where we left Jui’s car.” Oh, thank god. “Shall we take a photo?”

“What, looking like this?” Hao tried.

“Well, sure, memories are important,” Kuanjui drowned him out with his louder tone. “Let’s ask them for one.” He detached himself immediately to stop a couple who was walking in the opposite direction, handing them his phone with a wide smile. They took, like, five photos. Hao’s smile kept growing in each of them, as Hanbin’s hand progressively wrapped around his behind Kuanjui’s back. He was so stupid, in his adoration for Hanbin, he was perfectly aware. But how could he tone it down, when he knew Hanbin was doing as bad as he did.

Kuanjui’s ballet was amazing, it brought Hao to tears in the second act and he had to wipe them in order to keep seeing, because, otherwise, he couldn’t see anything but a confused blur of lights. Hanbin held his hand for the whole second half of the show, and he started commenting on every single technical detail that had amazed him as soon as the lights were turned back on. Hao wasn’t shutting up about the costume details and the storyline and the emotions, and they were talking over each other, excited and happy, and still able to discern what the other was saying by way of the habit they had of always paying attention to each other. There was so much they needed to talk about, only about this performance, and Hao suspected that they would spend the next two days going over every detail again. It was like they were suspended in a bubble where the rest of their lives didn’t matter. Who cared that they had a flight back to Seoul in two days. They were here and they were free, and they could roam the streets hand in hand, and they could hug and embrace in plain sight, and there wasn’t anyone, *anyone*, who would be able to tell them off for it. They were still careful, naturally, mindful not to walk around without covering their faces, paying attention not to yell each other’s names. But they were free. Hao dreamed of other trips, all of them farther and farther from Korea, where no one would know who they were. Or he dreamed of showing everyone the middle finger as he also showed up in fucking Hongdae with his boyfriend’s arm around his waist.

“Do you want to have a drink with me and the rest of the dancers?” Kuanjui asked. Hao threw a look at Hanbin. Drinks entailed conversation, and little privacy. Hanbin whispered a long sentence close to his ear.

“Are you sure?” Hao whispered back. Hanbin nodded, and by the shape of his eyes he looked like he was smiling.

“Jui,” he turned to his friend. “I’m coming, Bin’s going back to our room,” *ours* . It hurt in a nice way. He said bye to Hanbin with a quick squeeze of his hand, begging to please text him when he’d be back at the hotel. When Kuanjui asked why Hanbin had left, Hao sighed. “He said he didn’t want to stop me from going out with you and the others, that he wouldn’t even be able to keep up with the language and that I deserved time with my best friend.” What Hanbin hadn’t said and Hao had still understood, was that he couldn’t quite spend two hours in a bar without taking off his mask, and he couldn’t quite let a twenty-five dance company see him with Hao, in a foreign country, clearly on a couple’s holiday. Hao was grateful he hadn’t voiced all this, however. Even though he knew, it was nice to think that Hanbin had decided to only tell him to go and have fun with his oldest friend to date.

bin <3

- > *at the hotel*
- > *have fun*
- > *don’t drink too much*

janghao

- > *i love you*
- > *hanbin i’m serious*
- > *i love you so much it fills my thoughts all the time*

bin <3

- > *you’re supposed to be out having fun*
- > *don’t be thinking about me*
- > *(i love you a lot)*

janghao

- > *yeah yeah*
- > *i’ll text you when i’m coming back*

bin <3

- > *give me a call if u think i might’ve fallen asleep*
- > *nvm sleep i started a webtoon that’s too fucking good*

Hao had a bucket list of things he would have wanted to do with Hanbin on this trip. He managed to check them all out. Visiting all the places he wanted to see, done. Having dinner in Kuanjui’s favorite hotpot place he always mentioned? Done. Going shopping for the silliest couple items they would never wear together? Done. Taking selfies and four-cuts at all given occasions? Check. Writing wishes in temples? Check. His favorite, though? They’d seen a movie together, a stupid action movie with subtitles in traditional Chinese because Taiwan’s like that, which Hanbin could never understand, but he still enjoyed. A stupid, sappy, throwback to all the “fake” dates they’d been on just shy of a year earlier. Only this time, Hao had given in. When the light of the screen had hit Hanbin’s face just right, he’d kissed his cheek, and then his mouth, when he’d turned, surprised, towards him. Hanbin’s lips tasted like the popcorn they’d shared. Hao had pulled back with a smile, and he’d leaned his head on Hanbin’s shoulder. He would go back home with his heart full, and the knowledge that this was one of the happiest weeks in his life until now.

“Wouldn’t it be insane,” Hanbin mentioned as they waited to board a plane where their seats would be on opposite ends. “If we walked through the Incheon airport together?”

Hao scoffed at that. (He hadn’t just entertained the same thought, only because he’d been shutting it down after daydreaming about it for days.) “And then what?”

Hanbin shrugged. “And then nothing, we keep living as always, I guess. Would it really be that earth-shattering?”

Hao considered it. It wouldn’t be earth-shattering. It would earn them some heavy scolding. It would put them through some kind of grounding. And then they would survive. “Let’s stick to the plan,” he said, though. “We’ll do that next time.” Hanbin laughed, and he grabbed his passport and his suitcase. Hao wondered when they would be together again. Maybe he should have gone along with Hanbin’s insane plane.

hbd mom (group chat)

kim ji woong added you

park gun wook

> *will i be scarred from the answer?*

kim tae rae

> *legitimate question tbh*

> *aren't we here to organize a surprise party for matthew's birthday?*

kim ji woong

> *maybe if you let me explain*

> *he uses my phone sometimes i didn't want to be sus*

kim gyu bin

> *is your mother's birthday at least close in dates?*

> *like, i hope she wasn't born like in november*

kim ji woong

> *it's three days later, on the 31st*

> *if you must know.*

sung han bin

> *okay so let's not get too distracted.*

> *the plan was: i have a workshop on matthew's bd. so you all pretend like it's super fun to go visit hanbin (me) at the workshop, let's go and surprise him and his students yay*

> *he'll be okay with that bc the workshop is in the afternoon and he'll want to do smth in the evening (he has a scheduled livestream, after that).*

> *you get to the studio "pretend" like you're surprising me BUT once you've surprised me it's uno reverse card and there's a cake for him*

> *ok?*

> *all in?*

zhang hao

> *okkk*

> *do you guys already have an idea where to buy the cake?*

> *need me to help somehow?*

kim ji woong

> *no, no, we're all set*

> *thanks haobao*

zhang hao

> *no worries!!*

yoo seung eon

> *ooooh all this looks great! can't wait :D*

> *any gift ideas? so we don't buy the same things??*

kim gyu bin

> *ah right*
> *i was thinking of a water bottle (a fancy one)*

sung han bin
> *(a fancy one)*

kim tae rae
> *lol*
> *mhhh i got him a new watch together with hanbin hyung*

zhang hao
> *“mhhh” you already knew, why were you thinking about it?*

kim tae rae
> *xoxo*

kim ji woong
> *bottle of perfume!*

kim tae rae
> *plus the stuff we won't mention*

park gun wook
> *let's not!*
> *i got him a role play game.... i'll regret it.*

yoo seung eon
> *ah so i'm the only one who didn't buy anything yet*

zhang hao
> *no, me too!*
> *i was aiming at a jacket but i still have to go buy it though*

yoo seung eon
> *well thanks for your input!*

sung han bin
> *oh he'll enjoy everything!!!!*
> *hao, we can go tomorrow for the jacket, i don't mind.*

kim tae rae
> *text him directly why are you telling us all we don't care*

sung han bin
> *okay but calm down*

zhang hao
> *seungie you can buy him a gym something*

park gun wook
> *which means either clothes or equipment, i gather?*

zhang hao
> *yes. thanksss*

yoo seung eon

- > *okay great that's,,, something i know something about!*
- > *i'll ask the shop assistant it's their job after all hehe*

kim ji woong

- > *DON'T buy kettlebells, okay? everything but those. we have too many.*
- > *elastic bands for stretching? amazing idea.*

yoo seung eon

- > *ok?? will do.*
- > *guys but is quanrui in the chat?*

shen quan rui

- > *yes.*
- > *i bought a backpack.*
- > *i'll be there on the 28th*

kim gyu bin

- > *you could've replied a bit earlier, couldn't you?*
- > *lurking in silence like a stalker*

shen quan rui

- > *why are you replying you're sitting next to me, you could've voiced that as you've voiced the rest.*

yoo seung eon

- > *where the hell are you though?*

kim gyu bin

- > *we had things to do*

sung han bin

- > *look at how taerae isn't saying anything now huh*
- > *won't you tell them to text each other directly too?*

zhang hao

- > *no but literally where are you gyuvn and quanrui*

kim tae rae

- > *but i'm curious about the developments here*
- > *i'm never curious about hanbin and hao*

zhang hao

- > *thanks*
- > *we love you too.*
- > *i've lost two of my members though*
- > *oh no*

kim tae rae

- > *update us when you find them*

park gun wook

- > *sometimes i feel like me and seungeon hyung are the only normal people*

kim ji woong

> *now what did i do*

sung han bin

> *i feel unfairly judged*

yoo seung eon

> *thanks wookie, i feel the same sometimes*

sung han bin

> *okie :(*

Hanbin's favorite student — if he was allowed to have one — had to be Han Yujin, a trainee from Hao's company, set to debut in three month's time, who never missed one of Hanbin's workshops. He was a good student, he had an insane talent, and he picked up choreographies with incredible speed. Hanbin adored him. He was always extra shy around him, but Hanbin could see that he was bonding with the other regular students, even if they came from different backgrounds.

As usual, the crowd of attendees of his lessons was varied: very few idols, many trainees, professional dancers and just amateurs who wanted to get better. It was interesting how different people brought different energies and different responses to Hanbin's teachings.

"Yujin-ah," he called for his (unofficial) protégé, "Can you go to that group over there and clean up the combination with them? I'll take a look at this other side."

"Yes, ssaem," Yujin nodded. He was drenched in sweat, they all were, but he managed to look almost prim in his posture. He was even younger than Hanbin's sister, a whole baby, Hanbin sometimes wanted to just take him by the hands and tell him that, yes, he really was a baby. When he'd said this to Hao, Hao had looked at him with an amused expression. *You want to treat him like a cat?* He'd commented. And, yes, exactly. Hanbin wanted to treat him like a kitten, not even an adult cat.

"Yah, I told you a thousand times to just call me hyung," he said, off-handedly, as he walked over to the people he was going to help.

"I can't," he heard Yujin's reply, even if the kid was walking in the opposite direction. The lesson went on, the three hours of intense work going by in the blink of an eye, while Hanbin laughed and gave tips and suggestions to all the students. As planned, there was a cake in the fridge at the back of the studio, where usually just a few ice packs and water bottles stood. And, as planned, his lesson was disrupted by his friends. Just as the students were about to leave, the doors opened and a platoon of loud people in terrible outfits walked in.

"Hanbin seonsaengnim," someone shouted. Gyuvin, possibly. "Surprise!" Yeah, totally. He did his best to try and look confused and pleased and to start laughing like someone who had absolutely no idea of this. There were two students in a corner, two girls in messy ponytails, whose expressions were absolutely, hilariously, terrified.

"What the hell are you all doing here?" He asked, and he managed to share a look with Hao, who gave him a serious nod. *Everything going according to plan*.

It was, ironically, Matthew who spoke. "We wanted to say hello," he said, with a grin. "And to embarrass you a bit in front of your students."

Weird ass reply, Hanbin thought. But he'd noticed that, in the meantime, Taerae was already standing in front of the fridge. "Everyone," Hanbin raised his voice. His students stopped talking. "Let's wish our Matthew a happy birthday?"

"You all knew?" Matthew turned to their friends. "Hyung," he whined, looking at Jiwoong, who shrugged. "All of you?" Laughter made its way around the room. It was all a bit chaotic, students wishing Matthew a happy birthday, then saying bye to Hanbin, but not before Gyuvin made everyone in the room stop to take a mega group photo with Matthew and his cake at the center. Then the room slowly emptying for everyone but them, Gunwook cutting the cake, Matthew sulking because everyone had kept a secret from him, Jiwoong petting his hair constantly to soothe him, as if he didn't know, like the rest of them, that he was faking it.

“Gyuvin-ah,” Hanbin called him, pulling on his sleeve. “Your trainee, Han Yujin,” Gyuvin nodded. “I’d like an email address for his manager.” Gyuvin’s eyes filled with tears right in front of Hanbin.

“Oh, god,” he said, half-choked. “I’ll send it to you.” And then. “What do you want him for?”

Hanbin laughed, patting him on the shoulder. “I want to film something with him, if I can. It’d be nice to do that next week,” Gyuvin nodded. “Or when we’re back from America. But Hao will kill me if I fill my schedule the week I’m back.”

“Has he told you he’ll be filming his variety show with Seungie, those days?” Well, yes. They’d laughed about it. Hard, too.

“I know,” Hanbin said. “But we’ll both be in town, so it’s good enough.” More than enough, if he was honest. Gyuvin’s glance was a bit too knowing. “What?”

“Nothing!” He raised both his hands. Hanbin frowned at him, until he relented. “I like knowing that you’re as in love with him as he is with you, you know?” Hanbin looked away. “Because you’re both a lot, and you’re just, you know, well-matched.”

“Remember to send me the manager’s email address,” Hanbin replied, changing back the topic to something that didn’t make him want to yell. Gyuvin laughed in his face.

Matthew opened all the presents with a progressively wider grin, until he started tearing up, upon realizing that this impromptu party — with all of them sitting on the wooden floor of a dance studio — was possibly the best birthday he’d had since moving to Korea. Or so he said. Hanbin and Taerae took five hundred pictures, minimum. “I’m going to miss you,” Taerae told him at a certain point.

“Where am I going?” Hanbin replied. “We’re going to be stuck together on tour for six weeks.” Taerae’s smile didn’t reach his eyes, the joke landing a bit flat.

“I’m always the one who gives you the most trouble,” Taerae muttered. “But, really, I’ve always had you to count on, so, yeah.”

“No, but really,” Hanbin went on. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Or, maybe, he was going somewhere. Hao lingered to the back of their group, as they were leaving, each going back, supposedly, to their own companies. Matthew was supposed to do his livestream, Hao’s group had choreo practice. But Hao didn’t look like he was going to join them on time.

“We’ll be seeing each other later, for drinks,” Hanbin told him, upon reaching him. It wasn’t an invitation to make him leave, and Hao didn’t take it as such.

“I know,” he said. He sat down on one of the small couches in the small entrance area of the studio Hanbin rented for his workshops. Hanbin mirrored him. “Let’s say,” Hao started, and Hanbin didn’t know what to expect of this conversation they were starting. “Let’s say, on a purely hypothetical level, that I’m tired of having to match our schedules day by day in the hope of finding a number of minutes higher than forty-five to spend with you.”

“Let’s say that,” Hanbin said. Hao looked the tiniest bit nervous. Hanbin tried to smile at him, but maybe it didn’t come out as encouraging as he wanted.

“And let’s also say,” Hao went on, “that it would be much easier if we could find a way to have more time, without actually sacrificing any schedule. And that, still hypothetically, I might also have found a solution to this hypothetical problem.”

Hanbin’s laughter burst out of his chest, full, as he took both of Hao’s hands in his. “Okay. I’m all ears. But, ge,” Hao’s hands were cold. “Can we not talk about hypotheses?”

Hao took a breath. “It’s not something we have to decide now,” Hao said. “And it’s not something we have to *do* now. It’d take time, anyway, so,” he paused. “Can we start thinking about looking for an apartment? You and I. Our apartment.” He didn’t give Hanbin any time to reply. “It’d be a solution, because, you see, if we stop wasting time on driving, and if we actually have brekf-”

“Hao,” he stopped him. Hao tried to go on, rambling about morning coffees and sleeping in. “*Hao.*” He finally shut up. “Yes,” he said. “Of course, we can start sorting this out. It’ll take time,” he agreed. “But of course I want to live with you,” Hao’s eyes filled with tears. He smiled at him, feeling his own eyes sting. “I’ve actually been wanting to talk about this with you.”

“You have?” Hao was crying. Hanbin brought a hand to his cheek, wiping a few tears away from his face.

“So, we’re really doing this, huh?” Hanbin smiled, again, but he knew that he was tearing up too. “Building our life together,” he drew quotes with his fingers. “We’re doing that?”

Hao shrugged. “Obviously,” he said. He sniffled a bit loudly, Hanbin laughed, softly. “Oh god,” Hao said. “We’re going to have an apartment together, we’re going to be together every evening and every morning, and I’m going to cry properly, because I can’t believe it.” Hanbin hugged him.

“Thank you,” Hanbin muttered against his hair.

“What for?” was the wet reply. Hanbin couldn’t begin to explain it. He kissed Hao, hoping that would do it as an explanation.

hanbinsung

> *You knew?*

taerrorist

> *Always.*

> *Congrats.*

Notes:

I'll be back with the epilogue in less than you think!

In the meantime, feel free to comment (please, do!) and find me on twitter @whatifauthor or on retrospring (same handle, the links are in the previous chapters i'm too tired to embed them here too)!!!

Thanks for everything, again.

Chapter 5 (<http://archiveofourown.org/works/50821996/chapters/135982450>): **Epilogue**

Summary:

A brief glimpse into the future

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for [notes \(#chapter_5_endnotes\)](#).)

Epilogue

“No, I don’t think a wardrobe might fit there,” Hanbin’s voice sounded a bit strained. Taerae frowned, looking up from his phone. He exchanged a glance with Gunwook, who was, clearly, listening in on Hanbin’s phone call, too. “I don’t *know*, Hao,” Hanbin was showing remarkable patience, in Taerae’s opinion. “It’s obvious that the flat will have to be smaller than our current ones, with half the people in it.” He took a deep breath, and he met Taerae’s eyes. He looked a bit desperate. “Baby, why don’t we go and take a look together when I’m back, which is, in, like, two days?”

Gunwook snorted. Taerae, too, had to look away or he would burst in super loud laughter. “No,” Hanbin said, again. “I get it, but,” Hao might have said something else on the other end. “We still lack the whole documentation, if she wants to sell this let her sell it,” he said, with a huge amount of self-control. “I know,” he repeated. “Let’s take a look together, alright?”

Taerae didn’t have to ask anything. Hanbin’s house hunting adventures had already become a recurring joke among them. “Do I look like someone who has any idea how wide a *normal* wardrobe is?” Hanbin asked, with a sigh.

“Well,” Taerae thought that if he ever had to ask this to someone, he would ask Hanbin. “Kind of.”

“It’s around one hundred and twenty centimeters,” Gunwook interjected. Both Hanbin and Taerae turned to look at him with frowns. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?” Taerae never had a boring day with them, huh.

*

Hao's patience was wearing thin, he was going to get up and leave. This meeting could have been done an hour ago, but, *no*, the production had to find a thousand questions to ask him and Seungeon at the end of the first day of recording for their variety.

"Hao-ssi," one of the PDs turned to him. "Is there something you'd like to change for tomorrow's set-up?"

Yes, Hao thought, let's get rid of this post-filming briefing. "I think everything went well today," he said. His phone vibrated in his pants' pocket. "Thank you for involving us and asking our opinions, too." Wow, he was good at being fake, when he wanted to. The PD smiled, happy. Seungeon sighed lightly, on Hao's side.

"I'm sorry," Hao spoke into his phone as soon as he stepped out from the set. "I guess you're done with all the apartments now. Any luck?"

"Not really," Hanbin said on the other end. "But she promised me she would find more stuff and show us next week."

Hao groaned softly. "Okay. I envy your trekking trip, you can take your mind off this nightmare for a while."

"Come with," Hanbin suggested, and Hao could imagine him smiling.

"Yeah, no," Hao laughed. Seungeon threw him a weird glance. "Okay, anyway, I'm going home. Let's meet there?"

*

"What do you actually bring to a housewarming party?" Gyuvin often wondered how it was that Taerae had ended up with someone as clueless as Junhyeon. What a fucking dumb question was it?

"Whatever you want?" Gyuvin replied, unhelpfully.

"Hyeon-ah," Taerae re-emerged from behind a tall shelf in the store they were all in. Well, not all. Gyuvin, Quanrui, Seungeon. Which made sense. And then Taerae. And, by extension, Taerae's boyfriend. (Not that Taerae ever told anyone that he and Junhyeon had actually started dating, he just started bringing him along. And, since everyone knew that they'd been hooking up and going out for, like, nine months now, it was kinda implied.) "Just buy them, like, an aroma diffuser."

"What would they do with an aroma diffuser?" Junhyeon might be right this time. Useless idea.

"Get them chocolate," Gyuvin said, tired. "And, hyung," he turned to Taerae. "You can get them a nice bowl to offer chocolate to guests. So you match and it's actually useful."

Taerae frowned slightly. "I already bought them a vacuum cleaner along with Jiwoong hyung, Matthew and Gunwook," he pointed out. "We're not as unorganized as you are, buying house-warming presents on the day of the actual house-warming."

Gyuvin turned to Seungeon and Quanrui. A fucking *vacuum cleaner*? He found them looking right at him with similarly wide eyes. They still had no clue what they would show up with. But one thing was clear: they would look like idiots. "Well, at least our presents will be a surprise."

"Okay," Taerae said. Then he grabbed Junhyeon by the arm. "We'll be late, just pick something."

"What if they hate it, though?" Gyuvin had to find a solution and he should stop listening to Junhyeon's dumb reasonings. Getting to be his friend had probably lowered his IQ by extension. "Wouldn't it be better if I actually buy a plant like we originally said? It'll die on its own and we'll all laugh about it." Scratch everything, Junhyeon was *smart*.

"You're going to have to squeeze the plant in my car, because you couldn't buy one earlier and have it sent," Taerae commented. "But okay, get the plant."

Hao's face was carefully blank when he unwrapped their present. "Oh, wow," he said. Hanbin curiously looked over his shoulder. "Our neighbors will hate me soon," Hao said.

"But," Gyuvin interjected, because he needed feedback. "Do you *like* it?"

"It's a damn karaoke machine, why wouldn't I like it?"

*

Hanbin tapped the door code in with his eyes half closed. He was too tired. Dance practice shouldn't be this tiring. Maybe he was catching a cold. Maybe he was *dying*.

"I'm home," he called, taking his shoes off. "I'm also wishing I was dead."

Hao's messy hair emerged from their bedroom door. "It's one AM," Hao muttered, paddling through the corridor — short, their flat was minuscule — rubbing his eyes. "Did they, like, kidnap you at your company?" Yeah, Hanbin thought so too. "Did you eat dinner?" Hanbin shook his head, as Hao scoffed. "I'll heat you something, go get washed," Hao ordered.

Hanbin was very grateful that he didn't have to do anything except stepping into the shower, pushing his dirty clothes into the washing basket and getting in his ugly pajamas. He dried his hair roughly with a towel and stepped back into the kitchen with a yawn.

"Poor baby," Hao yawned, too. "Eat up, then you'll sleep." Hanbin nodded.

"I'll wash up the pan in the morning," he promised.

Hao ran a hand through his hair. "I love you, but I'll wait for you in bed," Hao yawned again.

"Thanks for dinner," Hanbin said, after him. Hao only hummed in reply.

*

Hao knew he was spoiled. Hanbin spoiled him. There was no other way to describe the thing, because why else could it be that he was spending yet another late evening sitting on the corner of their bed with Hanbin blow drying his hair, delicately running his fingers along his scalp and making sure it was all dry before they got under the covers.

Hao basked in his attention like a cat in the sun, absorbing it all with a lazy smile. Hanbin patted him on his head, turned the blow dryer off and kissed Hao's cheek. "Done," he said.

"One more," Hao whined. Hanbin kissed him on the other cheek immediately. He smiled at him. "Again?"

"We need to sleep," Hanbin pointed out. "You have that shooting at dawn tomorrow," Hao groaned. He had to get up at five. A violation. A hate crime.

"When I'm rich and famous," Hao said. "I won't do schedules earlier than ten in the morning."

Hanbin laughed quietly, and he unplugged the blow dryer from the wall. "Okay, rich and famous," he teased. "We also still have to pay the water bill, by the way. Can you remind me to do that tomorrow?"

Hao pulled Hanbin by the hands, until he reached him on top of their mattress. "Okay," he said. "I already paid for electricity, right?"

"Yeah?" Hanbin didn't sound sure. "Jeez, we suck at this." He laughed. Hao laughed, too.

"Eh," he shrugged. "I'll check tomorrow."

*

Matthew enjoyed the idea that now, technically, he could move out of the dorm, too, if he so wanted. Did he want to? No. But it was a nice idea, nonetheless. At the same time, it kept taking him by surprise when he turned around looking for Hanbin at home, after seventeen hours cramped together practicing or recording or working in some way or other, and he wouldn't find him. It kept taking him by surprise, too, when Hanbin got up after a movie night on a day off and went to put his shoes back on.

"Hyung," he found himself saying. "It's mega late, are you sure you don't want to sleep here?" It wasn't like they'd actually done away with his bed, as they'd threatened to do. Sometimes, Gunwook took it. But the rest of the time, it stayed there, empty and tidy, and a bit nostalgic to look at.

Hanbin stopped in his tracks. "But I don't live here anymore," he replied. "And—" He froze. "I was going to say it's not nice to leave Hao with no forewarning, but Hao's in Japan now?" Matthew laughed, as Hanbin sighed.

"Well, in that case," Matthew left it hanging. He hoped Hanbin understood what he meant.

Gunwook passed through the living room with a weary air. "Hanbin hyung," Gunwook said. "Can I sleep at your place tonight? Jiwoong hyung is giving me a headache."

"If you hadn't lost my *favorite* sweater," Jiwoong yelled from his bedroom. Hanbin's face was a mixture of horror and marvel.

"Huh," Hanbin commented. "I think that everyone should sleep in their own bed," he said. Matthew broke out in laughter. "Also, Wookie, we don't have a guest room. So, sleeping at my place for you would entail sleeping on a couch that's definitely too small for you." He looked apologetic.

"What about Hao hyung's—" Gunwook stopped mid-question. "I'm stupid, sometimes." Hanbin's laughter was wheezing.

"It's late for everyone," Matthew granted him this. "Let's all go to sleep. Hanbin-ah," he called to his best friend. "See you tomorrow at the company."

"Of course," Hanbin replied. "Sleep well."

*

Quanrui had occupied Hao's vacated room after he'd moved out. Which, in his opinion, should've meant he was free of Kim Gyuvin. Yeah. No. Gyuvin was on his bed, laying sprawled on it with a manhwa in his hands, lazing through it.

"Can't you just go back to your room?" Quanrui asked him.

"Hao hyung told me I could stay here if I wanted." Hao hyung was also a stupid person, on occasion, and he shouldn't be quoted as the maximum authority if he didn't even live here anymore.

"I'll call him," Quanrui stated. "And make him eat his words."

Hao didn't even pick up his phone. On Qanrui's second attempt, it was Hanbin who answered it. "Hey, Hao's, uh, busy right now," Quanrui frowned. "Can I help you?"

"Busy doing what?" Quanrui knew that he should mind his business, but he had to get Gyuvin out of his room. It was vital.

"He's, well. He's trying to teach my sister how to shape her eyebrows and do make up and it's a bit ruinous. All of it." Quanrui made a face. What the hell.

"Put him on speaker, please?" Hanbin sighed. "Hao-ge," Hao hummed. "Would you tell Kim Gyuvin to leave me alone in my room and that he can't stay in my bed all day just because you told him he could use your old room? It was true before I won it, but now it's mine, right?"

Hanbin's muffled laughter was distinguishable through the phone. That boy laughed too much. "Is Kim Gyuvin listening?" Hao's voice said. Quanrui told him he was. "Yo, Kimgyu," Hao quipped. "He's right, it's his room, now." Oh. Vindication. He turned to see Gyuvin sporting a very disappointed expression. "But why don't you tell him how it is that you've occupied his bed, huh?"

"That's cheating," a girl's voice said. Hanbin's sister? Cheating? What was she talking about?

"Shut up," Hao told her, laughing. "Kim Gyuvin, come over and have a chat, won't you?"

Gyuvin groaned. "You live too far away, I can call you back from my room, though," he said, and Quanrui watched him go. Having won his freedom should've tasted better.

*

Hanbin opened the door to his home to find Taerae comfortably sitting in his kitchen and chatting with Hao over a cup of coffee. "Hi, Kim Taerae," he said, kicking off his shoes. "I didn't know you'd be over."

"Your boyfriend told me to come," Taerae said, relaxed. "We had to discuss relevant business."

Hao laughed. Hanbin walked over and poured himself some of the leftover coffee in the brewer. He sat down on Hao's side, where he never sat. (They usually took seats in front of each other.) "Can I know?"

Hao turned to look at him with a fond smile. "Maybe it's just between us," he teased. Hanbin looked at him with a pout, until Hao laughed and patted his hair.

"Ew," Taerae said, and he drank more of his coffee. "I was just looking for advice on how to deal with meeting parents. You know."

Hanbin said nothing, at first. Then, he realized Taerae wanted a reply. "Oh, you want advice from me, too?"

"Well, *yeah*?" Taerae sounded angry. He wasn't. "Hao hyung, really, I don't know how you stand this dumb kid."

"Yah," Hanbin protested.

"Taerae," Hao laughed softly. "You're dating a guy falling under the same definition, I don't think you should judge me."

"Come on," Hanbin protested, again. "Why do you both hate me?" Hao laughed out loud, and he moved his hand on top of Hanbin's leg, under the table. "Anyway, don't beat yourself up too much for the parents thing," Hanbin told Taerae. "You have a face parents love."

Taerae frowned deeply. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

*

hanbinsung
> *HAPPY BIRTHDAYYY*

firstborn son

> *hyunggg thank youuu*
> *is hao hyung better? with the flu??*

hanbinsung
> *he's better*
> *not better enough to get to your bday party dinner tho*

firstborn son

> *but are you coming?*
> *or do you need to idk what do you do when your spouse is sick*

hanbinsung
> *stop calling hao my spouse help*
> *anyway of course i'm coming*

firstborn son

> *oki, see you later at the company anyway*

hanbinsung
> *ugh*
> *work.*

*

Hao wouldn't be able to describe what his favorite thing about sharing a house with Hanbin was. Living with Hanbin, in general, was his favorite thing. Getting to see him when he opened his eyes, getting to touch him when they woke up earlier than their alarms, kissing him unhurriedly in the evenings when they managed to get home at a reasonable hour, tidying their apartment together in a rush five minutes before anyone among those they knew came to visit them, laughing like idiots whenever they realized they'd forgotten to buy something essential once again. He loved all this. And he loved being able to initiate things without shame, without constraints. Hanbin was always happy to let things progress in whichever way Hao preferred. Urgent, needy, untidy sex, like when they came back from being away too long, or, like, when one of them came back from some kind of night out with their respective company. Hao was always eager to get his hands back on Hanbin, and Hanbin wasn't the kind who said much in this regard, but Hao could read him, and there was no doubt, none, that he wanted Hao's touch in equal measure. Most of the time, though, it was a slower affair, something with a build-up that began in a shared glance and progressed to teasing, lingering touches that dared sliding underneath clothes, until one of them gave in and started touching the other with more purpose and the other surrendered to it. It wasn't always the same, yet it was always intense and breathtaking, and most of the time Hao ended up whining in Hanbin's ear that he loved him, he loved him, he wanted to love him forever and ever. Hao's favorite thing about Hanbin, though, if he had to pick one, was how he'd grown not to be ashamed of their desires, how he'd learnt to ask for Hao to do things a certain way, how he wouldn't shy away from looking Hao in the eyes and ask him to be fucked, asked Hao to hold him through it, to be good to him. And Hao would always say yes. Hao's second favorite was when Hanbin started being silly for no reason, like the time he made a Transformer mask out of a cereal box, or the time he stopped folding sheets to turn them into superhero capes. Or the time when he started trying to learn magic tricks and kept failing and they spent three hours not being able to stop laughing. Hanbin had spent half of that time with his mouth on Hao, after that, his tongue sending electric jolts through Hao's spine from the place it was digging deep into him. Yeah, Hao loved sharing his life with Hanbin. Even when they would inevitably disagree about things, even when they were too tired to bother to have a decent talk about important things, even when their bosses got

in their way or their managers fucked up their schedules. There were days when they were both zombies and they barely had any energy to strike up conversation, and Hao would still choose to spend them with Hanbin, if he had to have someone around. Because Hanbin was his other half, and he'd always known it, but it was magic that he could realize it day after day, after day.

*

Hanbin had picked the habit of doing live streams from the spare room they had. A room that the estate agent had promised them as a second bedroom, because they were two renters, and they each needed their own space, right? No amount of PDA had clued her in to their needs, and so they'd elected to rent an apartment with a significant discrepancy in room dimensions: one of the bedrooms was double the size than the other. Which, had it been two roommates, would have sparked some controversies, but, being a couple, had left them with a puzzle to solve as to how to employ the extra small room on their bedroom's side. It had turned into a room with a desk and a couple shelves for books and they called it "the studio", but there wasn't anything worthy of such a noble definition. They were going to build a wardrobe to store spare stuff, sooner or later, but, so far, there was a mess of mismatched boxes and a treadmill. The boxes and the mess were never caught on camera when Hanbin did live streams. And Hao, of course, never did live streams from this same room. If he streamed from home, he used the bedroom, and he hardly moved from his side of the bed.

Hanbin, anyway, loved to talk to his fans from the comfort of "the studio", it made it more intimate than any other setting, it made it more spontaneous. People often asked him for a house tour, but he serenely ignored the request by talking about completely different subjects. He told anecdotes about his workshops, about his guest-appearances on TV dance survivals, about his group members and their silly antics. And that got the job done, usually.

Today, he was going to try to put some music on, to possibly accept suggestions from the watchers, too. That was the plan, anyway. People were giving boring suggestions, and he was ignoring them in favor of livelier, more dance-able songs. *Please dance, too*.

"I can't dance here," he laughed. "There's no space." He got up to show how little space he had, how little he could move around. "It's like this, you see, if I get up I don't fit on camera, and I can't move the camera further because it's already pressed to the wall," he chuckled. "This is the state I live in, I'm sorry, I'll move to a better place just to dance better." He made it sound exaggeratedly sad.

Go to a different room! Someone commented. *Living room!* Someone else. *Home tour, Hanbin-ah!* Well, what about no?

"Let's not dance today," Hanbin said. "Let's just chat about music." They kept commenting on other things, his hair, his appearance, and someone begged him to play some new artist's music. And he complied, and it was going well, he was forty minutes into this live, and people kept tuning in instead of disappearing, which meant it was providing some entertainment. "Ah, guys," he started. "You saw Jiwoong's solo dance? He came to me to check if his choreo ideas were cool, and I was amazed, because he came up with a lot of amazing stuff and I couldn't stop praising him and he was shy about it, lol. If I did part of his choreo? Like, if I created it, you're asking?" He paused to read some comments. "Ah, no. He did that on his own, we only cleaned it up a bit together. He's a pro dancer," Hanbin laughed. "No, really. He is."

Are you doing a solo single too? "Uh, actually, I don't think I'm doing that any time soon, right. But, you know, maybe next year? If I manage to write something I'm proud of," and if he actually cared about doing a solo song, because, honestly, he was fine with the dance activities and the group promotions, and he was also tired, these days. "Anyway, did you watch the *Street-*" Man Fighter episode, he was going to ask. Because I loved the dance battles, he was going to say.

"I'm home," Hao's voice roared through the whole apartment. Clear as the morning light through thin blinds. And Hanbin realized that he'd forgotten the most relevant thing to remember when he was going live: the post-it on the front door saying *Live*. Maybe his fans didn't hear. The audio quality always sucked, right?

"*Street Man Fighter?* The dance battles. Have you seen how-"

Well, fuck this. Hao opened the door to the room with his usual energy. "Hey, I'm back-" he started. Hanbin had turned towards him instinctively. He watched realization sink in on Hao's face. "Oh."

Hanbin tried to think about what to say. His mind supplied nothing. Hao closed the door again. Hanbin dared to

look at the comments for a split second.

Zhang Hao?

Hao????

I'm back?

AHHH OMG HAOBIN

2 years later???? all along?

Hanbin got up without thinking too much. He opened the door, and he faced Hao, who was standing in the middle of their corridor with a shocked expression. "I fucked up," he whispered. "But, since we're here, do you want to appear in my live?"

Hao's face turned into a warm smile. He nodded. Hanbin sighed. He was an idiot, but this would be fun, in a way. And their managers would have to clean up a huge mess, but, fuck this, and fuck their companies too.

"Oh, it seems like we have a guest today," Hanbin said. "You all already know Hao hyung, right?"

Does he live there, too?

Are they still together then

*f*ckkkkkkkkk*

"Of course they know me," Hao said, sitting on Hanbin's same chair, each of them completely uncomfortable. "Anyway, hi, sorry for hijacking our Hanbin's live. I'm Hao, nice to meet everyone. What are you doing today? Are you dancing for them, yeobo?"

Hanbin guessed the cat was already out of the bag, right? So why bother? "No dancing," he commented. "We were just telling stories. Do you guys have any questions for Hao?" He didn't even glance at the comments, he asked the first question himself. "Hao was going to cook dinner for us later, did you find all the stuff you needed?"

Hao's hand gripped his leg, off camera. "You promised you'd help to cook," he said, teasingly.

"Did I?" Hanbin hadn't. Hao had promised an intricate traditional plate and Hanbin wouldn't know where to start. "Oh, I remember it very differently."

"Well, that's because you always forget stuff," Hao jabbed at him. "Don't you think he's lying?"

"Yah, they're *my* fans," Hanbin protested. Hao laughed. Hanbin got up. "I'm getting us another chair, we're uncomfortable like that." His phone was buzzing in his pocket. He would ignore it. Hao looked up at him, an amused fondness predominating in his gaze.

"He's trying to make me forgive him," he winked at the camera. "Always does that." There was no going back from there, huh. Hanbin laughed at him, and he went to fetch the chair. They would live through the scandal that would rise. What a boring scandal can it be to just reveal that a public couple is still together, after all?

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 3h ago

SHB sent texts:

ooohhh hao's recipe turned out well

(i ended up helping)

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 3h ago

SHB sent texts:

well thank you for all the warm messages ily a lot

Aw4ke Updates @aw4keupdatesglbl — 1h ago

20250304 Hao posts on Bubble

[TRANS]

yah it's not my fault he forgot to tell me he was doing a live!

mhh-hh yep

ah the message above? someone asked if we're still dating.

he's stuck with me babyyy

5stars translations @starsintranslation — 1h ago

KJW sent texts:

oh the stories we could tell.

FIN.

Notes:

I'm a bit emotional bc this story took up the most part of my 2023 in terms of writing and i'm nver sure if i do a good job when i'm writing and i'm profoundly insecure but this au has brought me so much enthusiasm in writing it that i genuinely hope a small part of it has reached you.

i will be super, super glad if you can spend three words just to tell me what you thought of it. i'm on all socials, like, and i need feedback (i'm honest, i need it, i will die without it).

thank you for being with me through this journey.

Notes:

So! This is it for now, see you ,,,,, sometimes in the future!!

Please make sure to drop a comment, if you'd like, or come talk to me on Twitter @whatifauthor I'm chronically online in every sense :D

Close (#).